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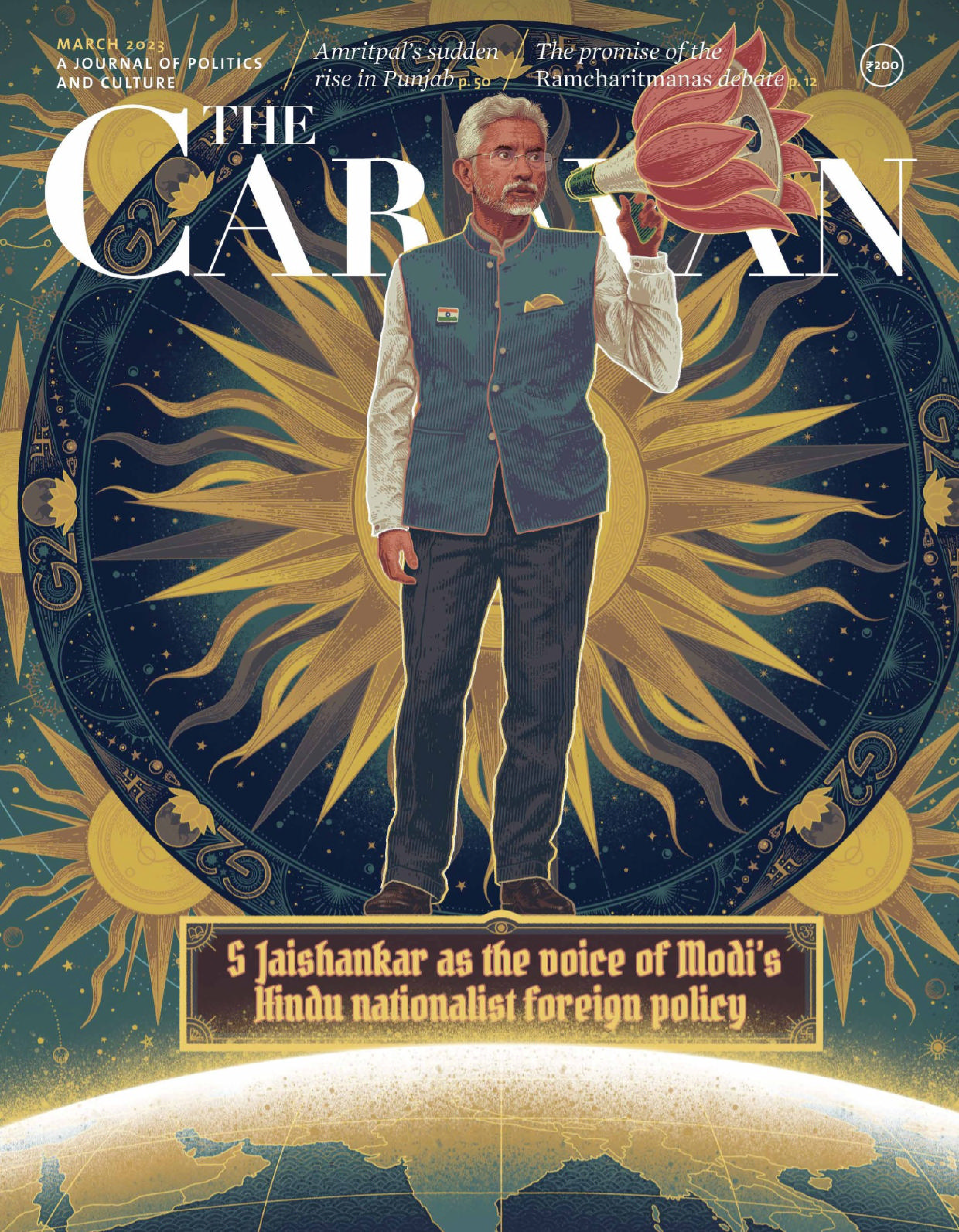

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Modi's Messenger

S Jaishankar as the voice of India's Hindu nationalist foreign policy

ERAM AGHA

After an illustrious career in the Indian Foreign Services, S Jaishankar's diplomatic career got a second wind when Prime Minister Narendra Modi installed him as foreign secretary in 2015. Four years later, Modi raised his political fortunes by appointing him minister of external affairs. In return, Jaishankar has served him well. He has helped consolidate Modi's hold over the operations of the external-affairs ministry and is rebranding Indian foreign policy in Hindu nationalist terms. As a result, the foreign ministry is doing very little foreign policy. While national security advisor Ajit Doval is doing the work behind the scenes, Jaishankar is the mouthpiece. The media loves Jaishankar—he is glib, distinguished and seen as a straight shooter. But diplomats are watching him warily. He has adapted himself to what the Modi administration needs him to be—he is making all the right noises about nationalism, puts up a rousing defence of Indian civilizational values and fiercely shields the government from questions and criticism.

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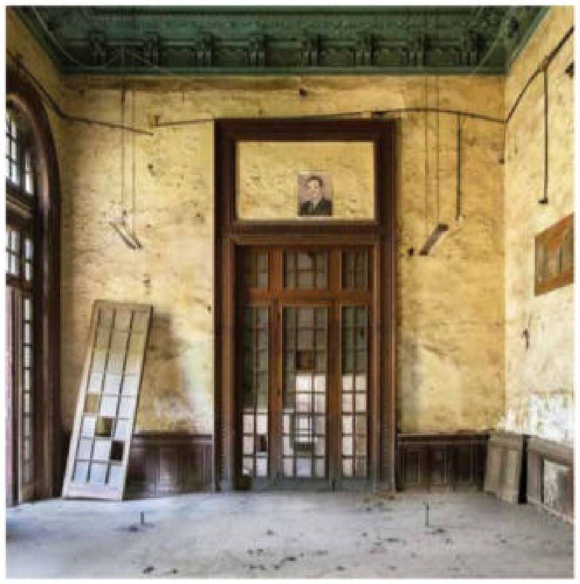

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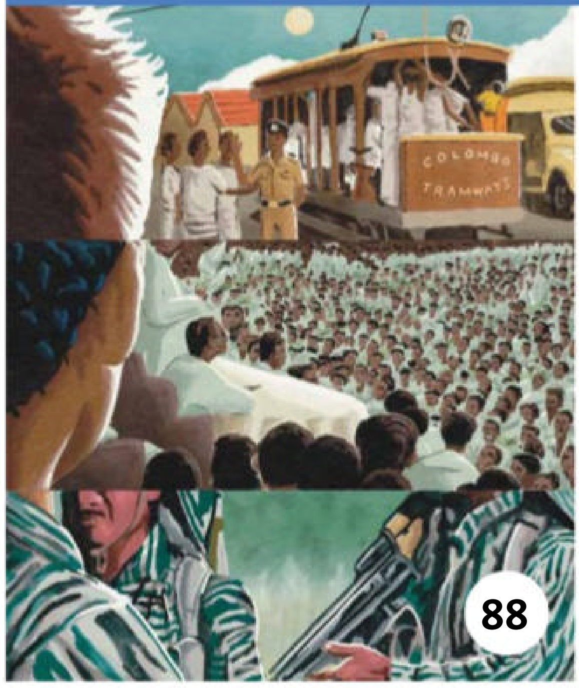

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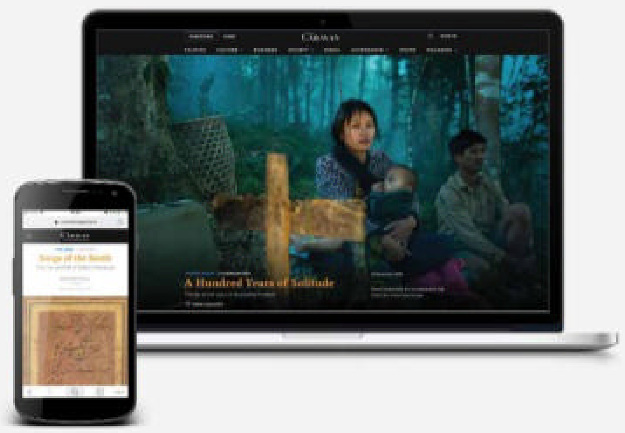

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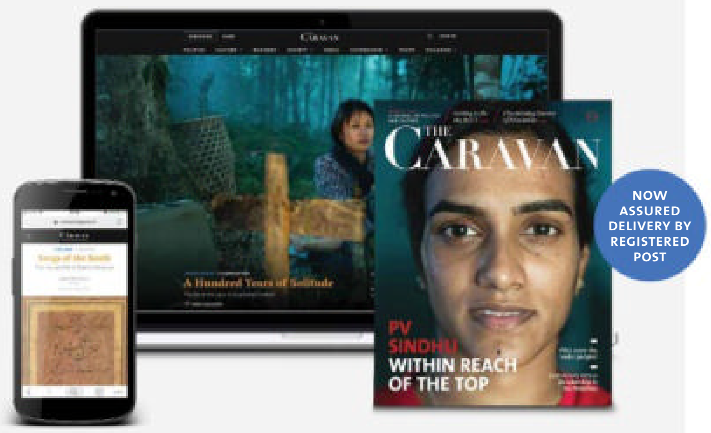

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CONTRIBUTORS

THE LEDE	10	**Sunil Kashyap** is a staff writer at *The Caravan*.
PERSPECTIVES	12	**Sagar** is a staff writer at *The Caravan*.
	16	**Surabhi Kanga** is the web editor at *The Caravan*.
	21	**Aathira Konikkara** is a staff writer at *The Caravan*.
	24	**Manik Sharma** writes on arts, culture, books and films.
REPORTAGE AND ESSAYS	28	**Eram Agha** is a reporting fellow at *The Caravan*.
	50	**Jatinder Kaur Tur** is a senior journalist with two decades of experience with various national English-language dailies, including the *Indian Express*, the *Times of India*, the *Hindustan Times* and *Deccan Chronicle*.
PHOTO ESSAY	64	**Amina Kadous** is a visual artist based in Cairo, Egypt. Her work tackles concepts of memory and identity. **Sukruti Anah Staneley** is the creative director at *The Caravan*.
BOOKS	82	**Huzaifa Omair Siddiqi** received his PhD from the Centre for English Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University.
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COVER		**Illustration:** Tijana Barna, Samyak Prajapati

EDITOR **Anant Nath**
EXECUTIVE EDITOR **Hartosh Singh Bal**
CONSULTANT EDITOR **Sushant Singh**
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BOOKS EDITOR **Maya Palit**
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STAFF WRITERS **Sagar, Nileena MS, Aathira Konikkara and Sunil Kashyap**
CONTRIBUTING WRITERS **Dhirendra K Jha, Prabhjit Singh, Jatinder Kaur Tur and Nikita Saxena**
EDITORIAL FELLOW **Jessica Jakoinao**
REPORTING FELLOWS **Sujatha Sivagnanam and Eram Agha**
MULTIMEDIA PRODUCER **CK Vijayakumar**
MULTIMEDIA REPORTER **Shahid Tantray**
FACT-CHECKER **Swetha Kadiyala**
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SENIOR GRAPHIC DESIGNER **Paramjeet Singh**
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HINDI TRANSLATOR **Parijat P**
TRAINEE JOURNALIST (HINDI) **Ankita Chauhan**
EDITORIAL MANAGER **Haripriya KM**
CONTRIBUTING EDITORS **Deborah Baker, Fatima Bhutto, Chandrahas Choudhury, Siddhartha Deb, Sadanand Dhume, Siddharth Dube, Christophe Jaffrelot, Mira Kamdar, Miranda Kennedy, Amitava Kumar, Basharat Peer, Samanth Subramanian and Salil Tripathi**
EDITORIAL INTERNS **Ishika Chauhan and Shradha Triveni**
SOCIAL-MEDIA INTERN **Sushmita Balakrishnan**

editor.thecaravan@delhipress.in

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THE LEDE

Drowned Out

How Varanasi's coin divers save lives
at the cost of their own / Communities

TJEERD KRUSE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: A misty view of Malviya Bridge, over the Ganges and surrounding ghats in Varanasi, India. Coin divers here plunge almost sixty feet underwater to look for coins and trinkets, and have saved thousands from drowning. As a result, many divers have lost their lives.

/ **SUNIL KASHYAP**

"It's been seven years since my husband died," Poonam Sahni, a garland seller and mother of two, told me. "Whenever he used to go, we used to be scared and would argue bitterly. But he did not listen to us." Her husband, Gubbar, a coin diver, died at the age of forty while removing a dead body from the Ganges, at Shastri Ghat. Sahni now receives a monthly widow pension of ₹500 every three months. She worries about her children's education. "We have a boat but it is now completely ruined. The house is falling apart. I do not know what to do, how to feed them, teach them or get a house built."

Over the Ganges, near Raj Ghat in Varanasi, is a double-decker bridge which connects the holy city on the left bank of the river to Mughalsarai, an important railway junction in Uttar Pradesh. A marvel of colonial engineering from 1887, the Malviya Bridge carries a rail track on its lower deck and a road on the deck above. Pedestrians and passengers passing by train or car often throw coins and tokens into the sacred river below. The structure, combined with the Hindu practice of offering gods money to invite good luck and fortune, gave rise to a peculiar and informal community of divers compelled into their practice due to desperate socio-economic conditions.

Coin divers begin training since childhood in the Ganges itself—the junction of both economic and spiritual passage. They dive almost sixty feet underwater to look for coins and trinkets. But most significantly, outside of their regular line of duty, many of them have saved thousands who have jumped off the bridge and fetched out corpses in equal numbers from rivers, lakes and ponds.

As a result, many divers, like Gubbar, have lost their lives in these selfless acts of rescue and retrieval. With time and age, in the past fifteen to twenty years, the number of coin divers in Varanasi have dwindled from sixty to just five. There are, however, coin divers in a few other major cities along the Ganges.

The people that make up this community of divers belong largely to the Mallah subcaste—traditionally associated with fishing and other work centred on rivers—from around Raj Ghat. Human and industrial pollutants—untreated sewage, agricultural runoff, animal carcasses, remnants of partially burned or unburned bodies from funeral pyres—coming in from the densely populated Ganges basin make the river unsafe for swimming. However, with neither boat nor farmland to make ends meet, diving remains their sole option. They scoop out a meagre sixty to seventy rupees a day on average, without any guarantee of a find. But sometimes work—the kind no one else is willing to take up—manages to find them.

"Whenever someone drowns in the water or there is any work inside the river, we are called," Gajanand Sahani, the chairman of the Jal Ganga Diver Committee, formed in 2015, told me. These divers even attend to desperate pleas from other districts. "It [often] takes the whole day for us to get there," Sahani said, when I spoke to him late in September 2022. "We ask the people there if someone had drowned before. If someone had drowned, who took out his body? Did it come to the surface by itself?" In this way, they gauge the risks involved. "When the villagers tell us that it had come to the surface on its own some time ago, we know that there is no animal in the water and the risk is low."

The closest they ever got to any formal recognition of their skills and knowledge of the river was perhaps only a few years ago. In April 2021, the Mahakumbh—the largest religious gathering in the world, held every 12 years in rotation at the four holy places of Haridwar, Prayagraj, Ujjain and Nasik—was held in Haridwar, Uttarakhand. The organisers utilised the services of around a hundred coin-divers of the Ganges as lifeguards. Theirs is hardly a profession. Basic diving equipment is unaffordable.

"We submitted a memorandum to the [state] government many times with requests to recruit us into the water police, but there was no response," Sahani told me. "We requested that they appoint us on a contract basis, but even that led nowhere." Any civilian might be awarded the Jeevan Raksha Padak for "courage and promptitude in saving life under circumstances of grave bodily injury to the rescuer." But despite frequently saving lives, the divers are seldom honoured in this fashion. Varanasi frequently sees incidents of drowning as devotees tread into the waters for their holy dips. "People who come to bathe here are not aware of its depth," Sahani said. "Others come only after making up their minds about dying. We have to save all these people." Over the past twelve years, he and his comrades have recovered about four hundred dead bodies from the river. They saved about forty lives in that time as well. "That is why we should get this as a full-time responsibility by the government and get paid, so that we can take care of our own families too." The divers want the government to offer security coverage. "If any of us meets with an accident, we deserve to be adequately compensated and ensured that our children get an education in a good school," he told me. With little incentive, buoyed by moral responsibility alone, their work continues with courage.

On 15 August 2018, Varanasi inaugurated its first-ever luxury cruise service, called the Alaknanda, for tourists to travel between major ghats of the city. Protests by boatmen who feared it would disturb their livelihoods barely made it to the news. Three years prior, two Jal Shav Vahini motorboats were flagged off at Assi Ghat despite opposition from the forest department that had prohibited mechanised boats in the seven-kilometre stretch of the river that is marked as a tortoise sanctuary. Today, in a bid to promote waterways tourism in the state, fleets of speedboats, double-deck and triple-deck vessels owned by companies such as Alaknanda Cruiseline, Antara Cruises and Varanasi Cruise, line the river, suffocating its ecosystem. The trend may drive even more Mallah boatmen and divers out of their traditional livelihoods, forcing them to migrate to other cities to look for work.

"The life of divers is always in danger," Shivnath, a former diver in his mid-forties, told me. "We do go, but we never know if we'll return. My father used to do this work. He taught us. But I will not bring my children to this work. I will make them study hard and do some other work. But I will not let them do this … it breaks my heart." Another third-generation former diver in his early sixties, Banarasi Nishad, reiterated the sentiment, "Make your children do anything but not this [job] in which there is no surety on our lives or deaths."

The emotional and psychological toll a diver's family undergoes has also made the young as adamant as the old to leave the trade if given the opportunity. "Whenever our father, Mahendra Sahni, goes diving, the whole family is scared," Lucky, a young rower, told me. The eldest among four siblings, the 20-year-old said, "I will not do this work. My mother is dejected from when he goes, till he returns. I spend my day rowing while others study."

Most third-generation divers have left the practice as they age—their bodies no longer have the strength for it. But for some, retirement is elusive. "There are many times we too think of stopping," Sahani, also entering his fifties, told me. "But when the family of a dead person starts crying in front of your house, then it becomes difficult to say no. After all, we have to do what we have to." ■

PERSPECTIVES

Chapter and Verse

The promising critique of Brahminism in the *Ramcharitmanas* debate / **Caste**

/ **SAGAR**

While speaking on the birth anniversary of the medieval anti-caste reformer Ravidas, on 5 February, Mohan Bhagwat, the *sarsanghchalak*—supreme leader—of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and a Chitpavan Brahmin, claimed that a few pandits had been misinterpreting Hindu scripture to propagate caste supremacy. Everyone was equal before god, he said. It led to a backlash on social media. Demanding that Bhagwat apologise, many Brahmin users posted a verse from the Gita in which the Hindu deity Krishna says that he created the four varnas. The ecclesiastical leader Nishchalananda Saraswati accused Bhagwat of not studying scripture, arguing that the caste system was fundamental to Hinduism. He was right. Brahminical literature, including the Gita, the Manusmriti and the Rigveda, provides scriptural support for caste. Bhagwat could not defend the indefensible, so attempted obfuscation instead. A day after his speech, the RSS claimed that, when referring to pandits, he had meant scholars, not Brahmins—who, thanks to their historical monopoly over education and Hindu rituals, are usually considered synonymous with the title.

SANTOSH KUMAR / HINDUSTAN TIMES

Bhagwat's comment came amid a war of words over the *Ramcharitmanas,* a seventeenth-century epic by the Brahmin poet Goswami Tulsidas. The remark was meant to be a conciliatory gesture towards the Other Backward Classes, whose representatives were leading the criticism of the text, but was undercut by Bhagwat's fellow Brahmins. The caste system has remained an Achilles heel for the RSS and its electoral arm, the Bharatiya Janata Party. Sangh ideologues, such as MS Golwalkar, Deen Dayal Upadhyay and Dattopant Thengadi, wanted to preserve caste, but the RSS's purpose was to unite Hindus as a political monolith. It sought to resolve this internal contradiction by projecting Muslims and Christians as the enemies of all Hindus.

This strategy has been key to bringing the BJP to power and hegemonising its political ideology. The BJP has been able to conflate criticism of its politics of hate with criticism of Hinduism. In an attempt to court BJP voters in the current political environment, opposition leaders such as Rahul Gandhi and Mamata Banerjee publicise their Brahmin identities, while even Bahujan leaders often bear Hindu symbols during election campaigns. This approach has not worked, since the BJP is usually able to present itself as the authentic voice of Hinduism and its opponents as "fake" Hindus. In this context, the debate over the *Ramcharitmanas* has been an unprecedented attempt by OBC leaders—who, far from being external critics, represent the majority within the Hindu fold—to question the Hindu identity that the BJP has so effectively weaponised.

On 11 January, the education minister of Bihar, the Rashtriya Janata Dal’s Chandra Shekhar, described the *Ramcharitmanas*, along with the Manusmriti and Golwalkar’s *Bunch of Thoughts*, as “books that sowed hatred in society in different eras.” To support his assertion, Shekhar, a professor of zoology who belongs to the Yadav caste, quoted a verse from the *Ramcharitmanas*: “*Adham jati main bidya payein, bhayaun jatha ahi doodh piyaen*”—Educating someone from a lower caste is like giving milk to a snake.

The BJP MP Sushil Kumar Modi, a former deputy chief minister of Bihar, responded by questioning Shekhar’s educational credentials, accusing him of spreading hatred and calling for him to be charged with treason. He also called the RJD “anti-Hindu.” Milind Parande, the general secretary of the Vishva Hindu Parishad, demanded an immediate apology. Shekhar stood by his statement, tweeting that he did not “care about the reaction of Gandhi’s killers, who spread casteism and hatred in the guise of a religious text.”

The debate has been an unprecedented attempt by OBC leaders to question the Hindu identity that the BJP has so effectively weaponised.

The mainstream media, which is dominated by upper castes, deemed Shekhar’s comment controversial. Savarna journalists might have expected a retraction or a reprimand from the RJD, but the party refused to censure Shekhar. Its national spokesperson Subodh Kumar Mehta, who belongs to the Kushwaha caste, tweeted that there was no question of Ram and Krishna being insulted by their descendants. In Bihari politics, Ram’s sons, Luv and Kush, are associated with the Kurmi and Kushwaha castes, which are classified as OBCs, while Krishna is believed to have been a Yadav.

Six days after Shekhar’s statement, the Samajwadi Party spokesperson Rajkumar Bhati, a Gujjar, joined him in his condemnation. “Tulsidas accomplishes two things in the *Ramcharitmanas*,” Bhati told *National Dastak*, a Bahujan media platform. “While narrating the story of Ram, he adds a couple of verses, without any context or relevance, that say that Brahmins should be worshipped and given alms, and that those who make them unhappy will never live in peace, while those who serve them will achieve progress. Also, he criticises Shudras—OBCs, farmers and labourers.” When his party colleague Roli Tiwari Mishra, a Brahmin, questioned him, Bhati clarified that he was against Brahminism, not Brahmins. On 16 February, the SP expelled Mishra and Richa Singh, a Rajput, after the duo continued to target OBC leaders who questioned the verses.

One of those leaders was Swami Prasad Maurya, a former minister in the Adityanath government who joined the SP before the 2022 assembly election in Uttar Pradesh. On 23 January, he told the news agency ANI that certain verses of the *Ramcharitmanas* that insulted women and Shudras should be banned. He added that he did not consider the epic to be a religious text, since Tulsidas had specified in one verse that he wrote the *Ramcharitmanas* for self-amusement.

The state BJP predictably demanded an apology, and a police complaint was filed against him. The deputy chief minister, Keshav Prasad Maurya—another OBC leader—held a press conference on the issue, on 24 January. He accused the SP of attempting to “appease Muslims” and “hurt the sentiments of Ram bhakts,” but had nothing to say about the contentious verses. He also reminded the media of the SP’s legacy, recalling how the former chief minister Mulayam Singh Yadav had ordered the police to open fire on the Hindu fanatics who attempted to demolish the Babri Masjid, in November 1990. After all, the demolition of the mosque in Ayodhya is considered a good thing in contemporary politics.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Protesters in Patna raise slogans against Chandra Shekhar, the education minister of Bihar, following his condemnation of the *Ramcharitmanas*.

One Brahmin priest, Raju Das, declared a bounty of ₹21 lakh for Swami Prasad Maurya’s head. During an event organised by a television channel, on 15 February, Das allegedly attempted to assault him with a sword. Maurya, who had refused to apologise, used the opportunity to question the veneration of Brahmin priests in society. “Recently, some contractors of religion have offered a reward for cutting my tongue or head,” he tweeted. “If someone else had said this, the same contractors would have called them terrorists. What should we call these priests from this particular caste: terrorists, devils or executioners?” He mocked Das in another tweet, asking why such a powerful priest had to resort to offering a bounty. “You could have used a curse to turn me into ash. You would have saved the ₹21 lakh, and your true face would not have been exposed.”

On 28 January, when the SP president, Akhilesh Yadav, attempted to attend a yajna at a temple in Lucknow, BJP cadre carrying black flags resisted his entry. “The BJP considers us nothing more than Shudras,” Yadav told journalists. “It pains them when we visit religious places and seek blessings.” The following day, he challenged

Adityanath to read the objectionable verses in the legislative assembly. Although the SP had initially distanced itself from Maurya's comments, calling them his opinion, Yadav subsequently appointed Maurya as a general secretary of the party.

Besides threats and epithets, the BJP's response to this unapologetic assertion by OBC leaders was to evoke the myth of Hinduism being a *sanatan dharma*—eternal religion—which BR Ambedkar has dismissed as an "article of faith," since most Hindu texts are of much more recent vintage than orthodox Hindus claim. Addressing a religious conference on 30 January, Adityanath—who had, two days earlier, declared that the sanatan dharma was India's national religion, undermining the secularism enshrined in the Constitution—quoted a verse from the Gita: "*Swadharme nidhanam shreyah, pardharmo bhayavah.*" He translated the verse as, "It is an accomplishment to die for one's own religion, no matter what it is like, for the religion of others evokes fear." He demanded unity from all Hindus, even those who face persecution within the religion, and linked this devotion with the nation's prosperity. Adityanath did not address how caste oppression could be resolved. This was not surprising, considering that, early in his first term as chief minister, he told NDTV that he believed castes help maintain social order.

On 1 February, the VHP tweeted pictures of its cadre welcoming the transport of a boulder from Nepal that would be used to carve the idol of Ram in the new temple at Ayodhya, which the union home minister, Amit Shah, has promised will be ready by January 2024. It quoted Parande saying that the gathering "not only showed their unwavering faith and devotion towards Ram but also gave a strong message to those conspiring for the disintegration of Hindu society." The identity of these alleged conspirators was made clear the following day, when the VHP's joint general secretary, Surendra Jain, announced that the organisation would ask the Election Commission to derecognise the RJD and the SP because of the comments about the *Ramcharitmanas*.

OBC leaders, many of whom consider Ram an ancestor, were not objecting to the deity but to its use by Brahmin writers.

OBC leaders, many of whom consider Ram an ancestor, were not objecting to the deity but to its use by Brahmin writers seeking to elevate their social status. They were in no mood to back down. "Who made the caste system?" Tejashwi Yadav, the deputy chief minister of Bihar, said at an event on 3 February. "A few people, who call their own caste superior and consider those who make up the majority to be inferior. When the so-called lower castes get educated and begin asking questions about the caste system, they start acting in their own way. So, I would like to ask: if we are all Hindus, why are some of us higher and others lower?" While sharing the clip on Twitter, he described such a notion as "foolish anti-constitutional thinking," which is "against the nation, humanity, harmony and love." India and Hinduism would progress, he added, "only if everyone receives their proportionate share. Otherwise, socioeconomic inequality will prevail."

This vision is in stark contrast to how the Sangh Parivar seeks to unite Hindus. The day after Yadav's speech, Champat Rai, the VHP vice-president and general secretary of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra—the trust responsible for constructing the temple in Ayodhya—tweeted an interview in which he explained how Prime Minister Narendra Modi had sought to instil social harmony in the construction of the temple. Rai said that Modi, who claims to be an OBC, told the trust that, along with the idols of the sages who had influenced Ram and told his story, the temple should also memorialise Shudra characters in Ram's story, such as Sabari, Nishadraj and Jatayu.

In a television debate, later that week, Bhati exposed how this notion of social harmony is treated in the *Ramcharitmanas*. "Are you aware what Tulsidas made Nishadraj say when Ram came to meet him?" he asked. "*Lok bed sab bhantihim neecha, jasu chhanh chhui leyia seencha*"—I am so low that one must bathe even if they come in contact with my shadow. "And, when Ram goes to Sabari's ashram, what does Tulsidas make her say? '*Kehi bidhi astuti karau tumhari, adham jati main jadmati bhari*'"—How should I praise you? I am a lower-caste fool. "These castes were insulted again and again," Bhati added.

In another debate, when the anchor accused him of reviving the politics of "Mandal and Kamandal," a phrase used in the early 1990s to refer to the dichotomy between the politics of affirmative action and that of religion, Bhati replied, "First, regarding your allegation that we are trying to divide society, let us understand that we didn't make castes. It was those who were at the top of the social hierarchy, who benefited from this hierarchy for thousands of years, who made castes. Second, Tulsidas was a poet. *Ramcharitmanas* is taught as literature in colleges and universities. It is an epic, not a religious text. And, even if you believe it is a religious text, it should be amended if it insults ninety-five percent of its own followers." Swami Prasad Maurya also kept up the pressure. "Is insulting Dalits, Adivasis, women and Backward Classes a religion?" he asked at a press conference, on 2 February. "What kind of religion calls its own followers lower?"

Over the past decade, no mainstream politician has questioned Hinduism the way Maurya and his colleagues have done in recent weeks. The RSS, BJP and VHP have tried several tactics to negate their assertion, mobilising Brahmin priests and pro-government anchors in addition to their own spokespersons. They have tried to portray the OBC leaders as traitors, as politically motivated, as spreaders of social disharmony and as people who are too dumb to understand Sanskrit—even though the popularity of the *Ramcharitmanas* owes to it being written in colloquial Awadhi. Whatever they tried, though, they could not hide the caste supremacy in their language. On the other hand, the SP and the RJD fielded politicians with academic backgrounds who could put forth their points with evidence.

One of the primary reasons why the BJP is losing this debate is because it simply cannot deny the religious

DEEPAK GUPTA / HINDUSTAN TIMES

LEFT: **Swami Prasad Maurya, who joined the Samajwadi Party before the 2022 assembly election in Uttar Pradesh, has called for a ban on certain verses in the *Ramcharitmanas* that insult women and Shudras.**

sanction to inequality within Hinduism. For over a century, anti-caste politicians have produced several scholarly works on how Hindu scripture establishes Brahmin supremacy, such as Periyar's *Ramayana Pathirangal* and *Ramayana Kurippugal*, Achhootananda's *Ramrajya Nyay*, Ambedkar's *Riddles of Hinduism* and *Philosophy of Hinduism*, as well as Ramswaroop Verma's *Brahmin Mahima: Kyun aur Kaise?*, a compilation of letters and articles the socialist leader wrote, in the 1970s, to protest the Indira Gandhi government's decision to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of the *Ramcharitmanas*.

The criticism of Hinduism for its gradation of Hindus is a tried and tested—and authentic—political strategy to counter the BJP's use of religion. It is, however, still limited to a few politicians from the SP and RJD, albeit with the support of their party leaders. To mount an effective challenge, it needs to become a national plank for the entire opposition. The primary Savarna opposition party, the Congress, has chosen to side with the BJP on the *Ramcharitmanas* issue, while Mayawati, an important Dalit leader, has maintained neutrality, criticising the SP for calling Dalits Shudras but refusing to acknowledge the sacrality of the epic. Dalits should have been leading this ideological fight, since denunciation of such texts is implicit in anti-caste politics.

On 26 February, Adityanath took up Akhilesh Yadav's challenge, reading out one of the controversial verses in the legislative assembly: "*Dhol ganwar Sudra pashu nari, sakal tadna ke adhikari*"—Drums, rustics, Shudras, animals and women all deserve to be beaten. Adityanath justified the verse using the reason propagated by a number of BJP spokespersons, claiming that the verb "tadna" had been mistranslated from Awadhi. He claimed that it actually means "to impart education." It is a lame defence, one that had already been rubbished by anti-caste intellectuals. After all, even if Tulsidas—who had equated educating Shudras with giving milk to a snake elsewhere in the epic—was advocating for the education of women and Shudras, why would he group them with drums and animals?

Swami Prasad Maurya tweeted out a response, noting that Ram had beheaded Shambuka, a Shudra ascetic, for performing Brahminical rituals and that, in the Mahabharata, Dronacharya had cut off the thumb of Eklavya, a Nishad who had surreptitiously learnt archery by watching him instruct the princes of Hastinapur. "Either those who equate tadna with education are naïve, or the people are naïve," he added. "The right to education was provided by the Constitution, thanks to the efforts of Phule, Maharaj Sahu and Dr Ambedkar." However, his party president did not counter Adityanath in the assembly, allowing the BJP to wrest the initiative.

Yadav should have been prepared to take down Adityanath. Instead, he outsourced the hard work of interpretation to his colleagues on the periphery. The downside of the *Ramcharitmanas* critique is that its flagbearers, most of whom are socialists, are not grounded in Ambedkarite politics, which stick to justice and equality. (Only a day earlier, Yadav had used a transphobic slur to mock Adityanath.) Nevertheless, if OBC leaders can use this debate to forge a national sentiment and maintain it throughout the year, the political Hindu identity may come crashing down. ■

Partial Justice

Ten years on, the Nirbhaya case still propels a narrow imagination of rape and punishment / **Gender**

HANG THE RAPIST
WE WANT JUSTICE
देश बड़ा शर्मिंदा है
बलात्कारी अब भी जिंदा है
बलात्कारियों को
फांसी दो फांसी दो

RAVEENDRAN / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

/ **SURABHI KANGA**

There was unusual activity outside Delhi's Tihar Jail in the pre-dawn hours of 20 March 2020. The jail's security had been fortified with additional battalions of the central reserved police force, and a crowd of spectators and media persons were gathered outside. As morning drew closer, the crowd began to get more and more energised. The moment that they had been waiting for was almost here—at 5.30 am, four convicts accused of gangraping a woman in Delhi in 2012, were due to be hanged.

Anchors on mainstream news channels, who had been delivering high-octane coverage through the night, began a jubilant countdown a few minutes before the execution. When the clock struck five-thirty, cheers went up in the studios and the crowd. One protestor distributed sweets, another held up a placard proclaiming the morning as the "the dawn of justice." TV channel headlines announced that justice had "finally" been delivered and that the rapists got "what they deserve."

This past winter marked ten years since the rape of Jyoti Singh, which came to be known as the Nirbhaya case. The incident had sparked massive protests and uproar, bringing the case into national spotlight. Thousands in Delhi protested near Parliament and candle light vigils were held at the India Gate. The case became a pivotal moment. The discourse on sexual violence in India can now be cleanly divided into a pre- and post-Nirbhaya phase.

The case had suddenly opened up room for an unprecedented mainstream engagement with the question of sexual violence, across the urban Indian public. Foundational feminist ideas, such as "rape culture" and systemic patriarchy, suddenly entered common parlance. The media was rife with debates on gendered discrimination and women's rights. There have since been innumerable attempts to address sexual violence in films, shows, advertisements, music and art. Every time a gang rape makes the headlines, which it does often, the Nirbhaya case is likely to find a mention.

But as much as the Nirbhaya case propelled the question of sexual violence into the mainstream, it cemented a narrow public imagination of rape, punishment and justice. Singh's aspirational story, of a young urban woman who was out in public with a male friend, struck a chord with urban, upper-class and upper-caste Indians, as well as with the media and the judiciary, most of whom were peopled by the similarly privileged. The gang rape of Jyoti Singh, as horrifying as it was, fit within a convenient view of rape, that it is mostly carried out by working-class men, in the dark of night, in a public space. Since it was not a crime fuelled by caste, it allowed sexual violence in India to be framed as almost casteless. And aided by sensationalised media coverage, public anger gave way to a desire for revenge. The media and the public used the brutal details of the case to justify capital punishment. Hanging became one of the primary demands of the public.

Ten years later, the Nirbhaya moment shapes much of how sexual violence is discussed in India. An uncritical focus on the death penalty, as just punishment, has eroded the space for a deeper, more effective understanding of justice in cases of sexual violence. The media and political parties shy away from the more difficult conversations, such as the ineffective and discriminatory nature of incarceration, or the flaws in the legal system itself. Where rape is the outcome of India's deeply entrenched caste hierarchies, or if it occurs in conflict areas or during communal violence, none of the attention that was accorded to the Nirbhaya case surfaces.

Within weeks of the crime, the central government set up a committee headed by Jagdish Sharan Verma, a former chief justice of India, to look into amending the law to better address rape and sexual violence. On 23 January 2013, the committee produced a progressive, feminist-minded report that expanded the definition of rape, introduced enhanced sentences for brutal sexual assault. It suggested that marital rape be included in the definition of rape. It also said that sexual violence by the armed forces and other uniformed personnel—referring to reports of rape from conflict areas such as Kashmir, central India and the Northeast—be brought under the purview of ordinary criminal law. It rejected patriarchal concepts such as "honour" that had come to be associated with rape.

The report acknowledged scholars and women's rights groups who argued that capital punishment was a "regressive step." To that end, the report said it was "not inclined to recommend the death penalty." Importantly, the committee felt that rape offences need to be graded. "There are instances where the victim/survivor is still in a position from which she can, with some support from society, overcome the trauma and lead a normal life," the document stated. "In other words, we do not say that such a situation is less morally depraved, but the degree of injury to the person may be much less and does not warrant punishment with death."

Though the Verma committee report is often touted as one of the most important outcomes of the Nirbhaya tragedy, in the decade since it came out, India has moved in a direction opposite to its recommendations. While the media offered some airtime and newsprint to the report's suggestions, the debates evaporated quickly.

The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 2013 that followed from the report expanded the definition of rape but did not recognise marital rape or rape by members of the security forces. It also introduced a minimum sentence of ten years for "aggravated rape" and the death penalty for repeated offences of rape. A string of similar policy changes followed in subsequent years, almost always in response to public outrage over a case in the headlines. This has taken place against the advice of rights' activists and legal experts, who maintain that when the perpetrators of sexual violence are known to the victim—which statistics show they mostly are—the possibility of harsher punishment can instead deter women and children from speaking up. Besides, it is well established that capital punishment does not deter crime.

OPPOSITE PAGE: **Protesters hold placards and shout slogans in Delhi shortly after the gang rape of a woman in December 2012. Death penalty for the accused was one of the primary demands of the public.**

In 2015, the Bharatiya Janata Party government at the centre lowered the age of juveniles who can be tried as adults for heinous crimes from 18 to 16, despite protests from child-rights activists. In 2018 and 2019, after outrage over the rape of a young girl in Jammu and Kashmir's Kathua region, the government amended the Indian Penal Code and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012, introducing the death penalty for child rape. Politicians across parties welcomed these changes.

The gang rape and murder of a veterinarian in Hyderabad, in late 2019, once again caught national attention. Soon after arresting four men accused of the crime, the police killed them in a supposed encounter. This outcome was celebrated widely by the public and various politicians across the spectrum—including from the YSR Congress Party, the Telangana Rashtra Samithi, the BJP, the Samajwadi Party and the Rashtriya Janata Dal. The Nirbhaya case was mentioned but only to sigh over how such swift justice had not been delivered for Singh.

Two statements—a speech by the Andhra Pradesh chief minister, Jaganmohan Reddy, and a comment by the news anchor Sudhir Chaudhary—encapsulate the evolution of public sentiment on capital punishment in the past decade. In light of the Hyderabad encounter, Chaudhary began his show on ZeeNews by describing it as "*vadh*." In Hindu scripture, the term connotes a killing that is "honourable" or morally justified. The morals in question reflect the Brahmanical ideology which underlies these texts—in this context, anyone who defiled the "honour" of a woman, itself a casteist and patriarchal construct in India, deserved to be killed.

Reddy's opinion, meanwhile, reflected an odd divergence that has come to characterise the chasm between legality and public opinion. In a speech in the Andhra Pradesh assembly, he saluted the Telangana police and the state's chief minister. "If the hero in a movie kills someone in an encounter, we all clap and say the movie is good," he said. "If a daring person does that in real life … someone will come down from Delhi in the name of National Human Rights Commission and say this is wrong."

In our reality, extra-judicial justice, whether it is through lynching or an encounter, is seen as doing the right thing. The men who show the strength to carry out these apparent difficult tasks are felicitated by the public and by politicians—in the case of the Telangana police, it was roses; in the case of the killers of Muslim men, it was garlands given by a union minister. Constitutional bodies, meanwhile, are mere inconveniences that must be endured. While the Supreme Court eventually indicted the police for shooting the accused in the Hyderabad case with an intent to kill, this decision did not lead to any change in the public or media's support for the encounter. "When extra-constitutionality is normalised and heroized, society becomes automatically violent," a recent article in *The Statesman*, titled, "Politics of Populism," noted.

"The thirst for capital punishment actually reflects the lack of our own ability to have delivered justice," Pamela Philipose, a journalist and reporter, told me. In a March 2020 article, Anup Surendranath, the head of Project 39A, a legal-research centre and clinic at the National Law University of Delhi, wrote, "Widespread governance failure ensures that our only response to grave social problems is punishment and criminalisation. It is a muscular response that sells well and allows governments to send the message that they are taking these issues with 'utmost seriousness.'" Surendranath emphasised that the rising demand for such responses among the public reflects an increasingly violent society.

Since 2012, however, there has been some legal and judicial progress, although it remains largely disregarded in public and political discourse. In August 2015, the 262nd Law Commission recommended that India move towards abolishing the death penalty for all offences except terror but failed to induce any political response. In its yearly reports on the death penalty in India, Project 39A has noted that the constitutional courts in India are trending away from the use of the death sentence, even though trial courts in the country seem to be intent on awarding death. In September 2022, the Supreme Court agreed to establish guidelines for mitigating circumstances in death sentences—the courts had previously stated that judges must consider factors, such as the accused's childhood circumstances or their social location, before condemning them to death but had not clearly outlined how this must be done.

It is not just that harsher punishments for rape are ineffective—they actively hurt the cause of justice, obscuring the truth of the legal process. In a nation where the police are severely underfunded; where there is a dismal rate of reporting rape and evidence collection is faulty; where trials are painfully slow; and where being born in an oppressed caste makes you simultaneously more vulnerable to sexual violence, more likely to be disbelieved, and also less likely to be able to access legal aid whether as the accused or the aggrieved, "justice" must have a many-sided definition.

Keeping these concerns in mind, feminists have opposed harsher sentences and high minimum terms for offences of sexual violence. These measures tend to not only disproportionately criminalise marginalised groups but also incentivise an increase in the rate of acquittals. Courts are reluctant to convict in instances of rape that do not fit the stereotypical ideas of brutality or violence. This is why the Verma committee's recommendation was crucial—without undermining the seriousness of rape, the report acknowledged that every instance of rape could not be painted with the same broad brush and accorded the same punishment.

The case of the artist and film director Mahmood Farooqui—accused of rape by a survivor who had previously shared intimate experiences with him—did not fit the Nirbhaya model. The incident, which surfaced in 2015, was complex, requiring deep legal engagement with grey areas such as consent, a history of intimacy between the accuser and the accused, the mental health of the accused, and the nature of the forced sexual act. It required the acknowledgment that rape did not need to be physically ruinous to qualify as devastating.

Even feminist scholars were divided on the particulars of the case, and progressive legal precedent was hard to come by. The first judgment convicted Farooqui under the expanded definition of rape in the 2013 amendments. The high court later acquitted him. It is hard to say whether the outcome would be different if difficult discussions on subjects such as consent had been had previously, or if there was room to sentence different rapes differently.

That the public image of a potential perpetrator can influence how rapes are viewed is evident in the case of the journalist Tarun Tejpal—where his elite and liberal persona made it harder for the public to imagine him as a rapist. Instead, it led to much outpouring of support that is reserved for the privileged.

Meanwhile, even the few progressive discourses that have emerged in the decade since Nirbhaya have failed to meaningfully address the hydra-headed monster that is caste in India. In a chapter for the second volume of *Fault Lines of History: The India Papers*, the academic Jayshree P Mangubhai wrote that the sole focus on gender in the Nirbhaya case "displaced attention from the differences among women in the country," flattening them into a singular caste-less, religion-less and class-less identity. In a 2013 piece responding to the public outrage the previous year, the scholar and writer Anand Teltumbde wrote that "Dalits who suffer alone when their daughters are raped and murdered are annoyed by this sudden outburst of concern for rape as though it was some strange occurrence in the country."

Teltumbde referred to the rapes that occurred as part of the Khairlanji massacre in 2006, when four members of a Dalit family in Maharashtra—the mother, a daughter who was a minor and two sons, one of whom was visually impaired—were tortured and lynched by members of the caste-Hindu communities in the village. Teltumbde noted,

> Why is it that heinous crimes—including the rape and murder of Surekha and Priyanka Bhotmange in Khairlanji—against dalits have failed to provoke anger amongst the larger Indian public? Were they any less gruesome than the recent Delhi gang rape? Even in the case of Khairlanji, despite spontaneous dalit protests lasting for over a month in Maharashtra and beyond, not even the so-called progressives had joined them. It was natural therefore that dalits felt alienated from the upmarket roar against the Delhi gang rape.

In a piece for the website *Polis Project*, V Krishna Ananth, a professor of history at Sikkim University, noted the various lapses of investigation by the police, which eventually led the case against the Bhotmanges' killers to be severely diluted and for their death sentences to be reduced to life imprisonment. Even though the casteist nature of the violence was undeniable, courts at every level decided against the application of the Scheduled Caste and Schedule Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. Ananth termed the events in court a "coverup." By refusing to see that the family had been targeted because of their identity as Dalits, Ananth wrote, "justice was denied to her and her three children." Because the courts had decided against the application of the Atrocities Act, the family never received any compensation.

An uncritical focus on the death penalty has eroded the space for a deeper, more effective understanding of justice in cases of sexual violence.

It is important to ask why the death sentence was not demanded as publicly or as ferociously for Surekha Bhotmange as it was for Singh. The list of cases of sexual violence against women of oppressed castes that provoked some amount of public attention in a post-Nirbhaya world remains limited to the Hathras case of 2020, when a 19-year-old Dalit woman was gang raped and murdered. Even then, there were no large-scale protests, like there were in 2012, nor any widespread reckoning with caste.

Sukanya Shantha, a law and social-justice reporter, said that for all its progressive undertakings, even the Verma committee report failed to meaningfully examine the intersection of caste with sexual violence. "If you take the Justice Verma report and ctrl+f and enter 'Adivasi' and 'Dalit,' you will find no mentions," Shantha said. For instance, anti-caste activists had consistently labelled the failure to apply the Atrocities Act as a direct outcome of the caste bias in the police and the judiciary, which are led primarily by upper-castes, but this issue did not find space in the report.

Caste can determine not just the act of violence itself but also its impact on survivors. The Shakti Mills rape cases took place in 2013, just months after the Delhi case. Two women had been gang raped at the Shakti Mills compound in Mumbai, within weeks of each other. Coming soon after the Delhi gang rape case and the Criminal Law Amendments, which now allowed death penalty for the repeat offense of rape, the case became immediately high-profile. The accused were tried and convicted in a little over six months, and were sentenced to death, an outcome that was widely celebrated.

But Shantha drew attention to the differences in the experiences of the two survivors, one of whom hailed from a Scheduled Caste community. Flavia Agnes, Audrey D'Mello and Persis Sidhva, members of the organisation Majlis, which worked on the cases, wrote an article in the *Economic and Political Weekly* in 2014, referring to the women with the pseudonyms Simran and Suman. Simran hailed from an upper-caste, upper-middle-class background. Hers was the first case that was reported, and the authors stated that it received support from the police and the state in ways that Suman's case did not—they described Simran as "An Ideal Victim," an "educated girl" who was able to understand and directly participate in her case. The state paid Simran's medical bills and gave her special security during treatment at an upscale hospital, and she received immense amounts of emotional and mental support from the government and case-workers.

Shantha, who reported on the case, said that Suman became “a case in the background.” Suman hailed from the Valmiki community and had dropped out of school. Her mother worked as a security guard. The survivor had faced terrible internal injuries during the gang rape and was further subjected to humiliating tests during her rape examination, which did not take place at a posh hospital like Simran’s had. She and her mother lost work and money every time they travelled to the crime branch to give their testimonies, which was nearly daily. The authors noted that the “public prosecutor’s tone while addressing her was different, less patient and laced with irritation and disrespect, which was rather jarring, as compared to his behaviour in the Simran case.” Suman needed funds. The trauma of the incident had rendered her mentally and physically ill, unable to work. “Both the case workers and the government agencies had neglected to apply sections of the Atrocities Act in Suman’s case, which would have entitled her to compensation,” Shantha said. Eventually, Suman approached the National Commission of Scheduled Castes, which awarded her ₹5 lakh.

Where rape is the outcome of India’s deeply entrenched caste hierarchies, none of the attention that was accorded to the Nirbhaya case surfaces.

“Neither the state nor the wider society recognizes that Dalit women face particular vulnerabilities to violence,” the academic Mangubhai writes. She lists multiple examples of how this plays out. Upper-caste men often use sexual violence against Dalit or lower-caste women to punish the entire family or community and to maintain caste hierarchies. Upper-caste perpetrators are more likely to get away because of their higher social power and because members of the police and judiciary often belong to their caste groups or share their caste biases. Dalit women are comparatively poorer, making it more likely for them to be working and accessing public spaces, widening their vulnerability to casteist violence. Widespread perceptions that the Atrocities Act is misused makes it less likely for oppressed-caste women to be believed when and if they do report casteist sexual violence. The list goes on.

Even as Dalit and Bahujan women find themselves overrepresented in statistics of sexual violence and absent from the public imagination, lower-caste communities find disproportionately high representation among those condemned to jailtime, and also to death row. “Dalit death-row convicts exist in higher proportion than their population ratios,” Surendranath, of Project 39A, told me.

In the past decade, only one movement associated with gender justice has come close to the scale of the Nirbhaya protests—the MeToo movement, when thousands of women across India shared cases of harassment and violence on social media. But this also took place in the same “casteless” frame as Nirbhaya. Accounts of harassment and violence were limited to English social-media websites, which are easiest for elite and upper-caste women to access. These were then celebrated in society as the outpouring of all “women” against all “men,” erasing the different realities of women in India.

A piece in Human Rights Watch put together accounts of various women in India’s vast unorganised sector, who said there was no option of MeToo for women “like us.” Writing in *Firstpost*, Christina Thomas Dhanaraj described MeToo as a case of “selective outrage” by Savarna feminists, who had long been complicit in the oppression of Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi women. These women had never received the kind of solidarity or attention that was on display for the MeToo survivors or for Nirbhaya. When violence against Dalit women is committed by oppressors that include Savarna men, would Savarna women speak up? “Revolutions cannot start with the privileged and then spread to those that are not,” Dhanaraj concluded.

A special word of condemnation must be reserved for the media, which has been a willing collaborator in the distortion of all issues of importance in the past decade. Sexual violence is no exception. Philipose commented on the media’s role in 2012 in her book. “The question arises whether media coverage of the Jyoti Singh gang rape made adequate use of the power of journalism to understand a brutal criminal act and interpret it for large and diverse audiences in a manner that meaningfully confronts endemic violence,” Philipose said. “The answer is unequivocal: it did not.” She noted that the media acted only on behalf of the elites and excoriated it for wilfully choosing its own profits over public interest.

Shantha told me that the Nirbhaya case created the environment in newsrooms for reporters to pursue stories of sexual violence in depth. “So you can’t even say that you are not writing about gender,” Shantha said. But while each day’s newspapers had multiple reports on gender-based issues, these came from a singular lens. “All the newsrooms where there is serious reporting about gender, all those women reporters—and they are mostly women—are all Savarna.”

At around dusk, the evening before the March 2020 execution at Tihar, the family of one of the convicts was seated on the pavement a few feet away from me. They had come for an “*aakhri mulaqat*,” a last visit, which they were entitled to by law. Journalists were beginning to gather. OB vans were parked up and down the street.

Shortly, a car pulled up next to me, and a woman, dressed in black and white—likely, a lawyer—alighted. She had noticed the crowd. To anyone witnessing the scene, the fact that the family belonged to Delhi’s underprivileged classes would have been unmissable. The woman, by contrast, was visibly upper class. She asked me what was going on. I explained that the convicts in the Nirbhaya case were due to be hanged in the morning, and that the family of one of them was pleading with the jail authorities to let them meet their son for the final time. She took one look at the family members and echoed what the media had been repeating ad nauseam for seven years. “Good. That is what they deserve.” ■

Temple Tantrum

Malikappuram's attempt to cash in on the Sabarimala controversy / **Film**

AFP / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: On 2 January 2019, Bindhu Ammini and Kanaka Durga managed to enter the Sabarimala temple under police protection.

/ **AATHIRA KONIKKARA**

In the climactic scene of Vishnu Sasi Shankar's film *Malikappuram*, its female protagonist, Kalyani, climbs the 18 stairs leading to the sanctum sanctorum of the Sabarimala temple, finally fulfilling her long-held desire to meet Ayyappan, the deity to which the pilgrimage site is dedicated. However, this is not a pathbreaking story about a woman making the trek to visit the deity in defiance of the social mores that prohibit women of menstruating age from entering the temple's premises. Kalyani—known to all as Kallu and played by the child actor Deva Nandha—is eight years old, and her stubborn insistence on meeting Ayyappan is indulged by everyone she meets.

The film's worldview becomes clear even before it starts. Among the many people thanked in the opening credits are the prime minister, Narendra Modi; the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's *sarsanghchalak*—supreme leader—Mohan Bhagwat; the RSS's *prant pracharak*—provincial leader—for Kerala, S Sudarshan; the union minister of state for external affairs, V Muraleedharan; the Bharatiya Janata Party's Kerala president, K Surendran; the veteran RSS and BJP leader and former governor of Mizoram, Kummanam Rajasekharan; the Kerala state president of the Vishva Hindu Parishad, Viji Thampi; the BJP's former state spokesperson Sandeep Warrier; and the Hindutva activist Rahul Easwar, whose Ayyappa Dharma Sena played a key part in the protests against the Supreme Court's 2018 decision to allow women of all ages to visit the temple. I tried hard, but failed, to recall another Malayalam film that had extended gratitude to the RSS, leave alone the entire slate of Sangh Parivar leaders in the state.

There have been a number of Malayalam films on Sabarimala, most notably the 1975 film *Swami Ayyappan*, starring the popular actors Sukumari, Srividya, Gemini Ganesan and Thikkurissy Sukumaran Nair. The film narrates the myth of Ayyappan's birth and his adoption by the tenth-century Pandya dynasty. The deity is projected as a symbol of inclusivity because of his friendship with Vavar, a Muslim. Sabarimala is open to men of all backgrounds—unlike other popular temples in Kerala, which explicitly ban the entry of non-Hindus and, before the Travancore government's Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936, prohibited Bahujans from even approaching them—but not to women of menstruating age. In *Swami Ayyappan*, a man asks an elderly pilgrim about the prohibition. The pilgrim repeats the oft-cited rationale that young women cannot visit the temple as Ayyappan is celibate. As if to emphasise the argument that female devotees are still encouraged, the film features a story about Ayyappan appearing in the guise of a snake charmer to protect a young girl from a snake during her pilgrimage.

Malikappuram gets its title from the name given to female pilgrims—those who have not yet attained puberty or those who have crossed menopause—in remembrance to Malikappurathamma, a goddess who has a temple dedicated to her near Sabarimala. The film was released on 30 December 2022, during the pilgrimage season, four years after the Supreme Court struck down the prohibition on women as unconstitutional. (It has since received theatrical releases in Tamil and Telugu, and premiered on Disney+ Hotstar on 15 February.) In the aftermath of the verdict, Savarna men and women took to the streets, declaring that it was an attack on the temple's traditions.

The Sangh Parivar's stance on the ban has been muddled. In 2006, P Parameswaran, the director of an RSS-affiliated think tank, said that there was no reason why women should not be allowed in Sabarimala. That year, the petition challenging the ban was filed in the Supreme Court by the Indian Young Lawyers' Association, which has strong ties to the RSS. As late as 2016, Suresh Joshi, the *sarkaryavah*—general secretary—of the RSS, argued that "women must be admitted wherever men are admitted," and K Surendran wrote in a Facebook post that, just because Ayyappan was celibate, it did not "mean that he is a misogynist." The Sangh perhaps perceived this as a way to bolster its support among women in its larger scheme of Hindu consolidation.

That year, a Chennai-based organisation called People for Dharma—whose president, Shilpa Nair, is a BJP member—launched the "Ready to Wait" campaign, under which women pledged to wait until menopause before visiting Sabarimala. Following the Supreme Court verdict, the BJP recognised the political gains that could be made by milking the anger of conservative Kerala. Surendran all but admitted this when he said that the sentiments of the women of Kerala compelled the BJP to change its stance. The RSS, which had initially welcomed the verdict, clumsily shifted its position to keep up with its political wing. Joshi accused the Left Democratic Front government in the state of implementing the verdict in haste, "without taking the sentiments of the devotees into consideration."

***Malikappuram* deploys an apolitical treatment to its story for the most part, but its Brahminical politics surface from time to time.**

Soon after the verdict, the Sabarimala Karma Samithi, an umbrella body of right-wing organisations, was formed to mobilise opposition to the decision and to the state government's efforts to facilitate the safe entry of women at the temple. It was convened by KP Sasikala, the president of the Hindu Aikya Vedi, who is known for her Islamophobic statements. While promoting *Malikappuram*, its lead actor, Unni Mukundan, met the HAV's state working president, Valsan Thillankeri, and called him "a gem of a person."

On 2 January 2019, Bindhu Ammini, a lawyer and Dalit activist, and Kanaka Durga, an employee at the Kerala State Civil Supplies Corporation, managed to enter the temple under police protection. The SKS called for a state-wide shutdown, and its protests turned violent in several districts. No woman has attempted the pilgrimage since. While Durga was ostracised by her family, Ammini's Dalit identity was a specific cause of fury. She was assaulted by strangers many times, even years later. In a Facebook post, on 5 January 2022, she wrote that she no longer wanted to live in Kerala, since it had become clear that the state is not safe for women and Dalits.

Malikappuram does not confront the proverbial elephant in the room. The only time that the controversy over the verdict is referenced is when a boy in Kallu's class asks the teacher whether women are banned from entering Sabarimala. The teacher deflects the question by asking him whether he has done his homework. In the world of the film, the prohibition is a belief set in stone that is not up for debate. Kallu's grandmother urges her son, Ajayan, to make the pilgrimage as soon as possible, since Kallu is approaching puberty. The clock is ticking on her dream to visit Ayyappan. Ajayan refuses an offer to go work in the Gulf partly because it would mean not being around for two years, by which time it would be too late.

There is, however, a veiled dig at Ammini and Durga in the film's denouement. Mukundan's character, D Ayyappadas, a police officer—and possible incarnation of Ayyappan—who helps Kallu make her pilgrimage, makes an apparent reference to the police protection the women had received and the violence that followed. "We helped undeserving people ascend to Sabarimala, against our will," he tells his chief inspector. "What was the result? It is Ayyappan's discretion to decide whom he wants to see up there."

Instead of delving into the polemics of temple entry, the film seeks to cash in on the religious fervour around Sabarimala—it has raked in over ₹100 crore at the box office, during a pilgrim season in which the temple earned record revenues—and to indoctrinate children by crafting an action adventure, albeit with the thinnest of plots, centred on the pilgrimage. Kallu is a happy child with a loving family who is obsessed with Ayyappan, to the exclusion of all other interests. She dreams about Ayyappan, waves at his portrait

ABOVE: The film seeks to indoctrinate children by crafting an action adventure centred on the Sabarimala pilgrimage.

before going to school, doodles him in class, makes her grandmother tell her stories about him and pesters Ajayan to take her to Sabarimala in every conversation they have. Her grandmother helps in this quest by also pestering Ajayan about this desire in every conversation *they* have. When Kallu's best friend, Piyush Unni, offers her trading cards of Marvel characters, she declines—Ayyappan is the only superhero she cares about.

Ajayan promises to take Kallu to Sabarimala during the next pilgrimage season but, after a local gangster beats him up in front of his daughter over an unpaid debt, he kills himself. In an attempt to convey to the audience that it is not completely averse to bucking tradition, the film lets us know that Ajayan wanted Kallu, rather than a male relative, to perform his last rites, though it is unclear when he communicated this desire. Within days of losing her father, however, Kallu is once again adamant that she wants to make the pilgrimage. She convinces Unni to take her, and the two run away from home.

As they make the bus journey, Kallu attracts the attention of Mahi, a child trafficker heading to Sabarimala in the hope of finding little girls to kidnap. Like many other Malayalam films, *Malikappuram* casts a dark-skinned Tamil-speaking man as its primary antagonist. Before he can make his move, though, they are joined by Ayyappadas, whom the children trust because he looks just like the deity in Kallu's dreams. Ayyappadas watches over Kallu and Unni, gives them—and the audience—a guided tour of the pilgrimage and beats up Mahi's entire gang, armed with only a flashlight, in order to deliver Kallu to the 18 stairs. She pays obeisance to Ayyappan, and the children return home with Unni's father to live happily ever after.

Malikappuram deploys an apolitical treatment to its story for the most part, in order to deflect charges of being religious propaganda, but its Brahminical politics do surface from time to time. Kallu's classmates are terrified of being touched by the man who handles cremations in their village, who is also depicted as an alcoholic. Unni shocks everyone at a roadside eatery by asking for chicken curry, in a state where over ninety percent of the population eats meat. Both these incidents are used for comedic effect. The actor Manoj K Jayan plays a Muslim chief inspector who applies sandalwood paste to his forehead, breaks a coconut for the Hindu deity Ganesh and greets everyone with a cheerful "Swami Sharanam." This is the Indian pretence of secularism in practice, which only means that Muslims must blend in obligingly.

In recent years, Sabarimala's claims of welcoming everyone other than menstruating women have also been punctured. Even though the Travancore Devaswom Board, an autonomous body under the Kerala government that administers temples in the state, began appointing Dalit priests in 2017, the *melshanti*—high priest—at Sabarimala must be a Malayali Brahmin, and a single Namboodiri family has monopolised the post since 1902. When CV Vishnu Narayanan, who belongs to the Ezhava community, applied to become melshanti, in 2018, he was rejected because of his caste. Three weeks before *Malikappuram* was released, Narayanan and other priests from the Other Backward Classes moved the Kerala High Court against this reservation for Brahmins. The tribal Mala Araya community has also questioned the Brahminical appropriation of Ayyappan, who, it believes, was born to a Mala Araya couple. However, efforts by the socially disadvantaged to reclaim their histories, or to simply assert their right to equal access, do not find space in debates caught up in notions of purity. ■

Through Their Eyes

Impact-oriented environmental filmmaking remains a lonely battle / Film

/ **MANIK SHARMA**

A tiny turtle moves through garbage, as the camera languidly pans to follow its slow crawl. In the background, the city's traffic hurtles across relentlessly, a blur of noise and unrestrained movement. It is a comparative snapshot of pace, the chaos of a city pitted against a dawdling animal invisibilised by it. In another scene, a vertical pan of a busy neighbourhood, its somewhat disorganised life is contrasted by the leisurely stroll of a pig across a dimly lit ravine. Shaunak Sen's Oscar-nominated documentary *All That Breathes* expands the geography of everyday existence by candidly dragging into view the understated, yet fragile, presence of our other neighbours—animals.

Kartiki Gonsalves's *The Elephant Whisperers* ditches this dystopic texture for a more alluring juxtaposition. In a scene from the film, Bellie, the middle-aged caretaker of a young elephant calf, Raghu, asks him to lie down in front of her. "I will spank you if you lie on me," she says, as if to her child. Nominated in the Documentary Short category at the Oscars, the film focusses on the unusual, yet reassuring, dynamic of a family of elephants and their human caregivers, the kind of serendipitous co-existence we seek but rarely find in our everyday lives.

Sen's film tells the story of the brothers Mohammad Saud and Nadeem Shehzad, who run a wildlife rescue clinic in north-east Delhi, where they save Black Kites that fall from the city's grey skies. Unlike the vérité tendency of eulogising courage and kindness, Sen's film mines, alongside the discomforting greyness of an inhospitable city, the many personal challenges of their own lives. Gonsalves's film, on the other hand, follows the more straightforward template of romanticising the unlikely but cheerful bond between Raghu and his human caregivers, Bomman and Bellie.

Coincidentally, these two documentaries, geographically distant and nominated in different categories—a first in India's history—share similar ecological concerns. Pivotal to both are humans offering love and care to endangered animals, to the extent that their affection anthropomorphises them. The parallel highs of both films, however, also illustrate the challenges of making cinema around ecological issues—at least, cinema that entertains the possibility of impact—and the contrast these life-affirming stories, about the kindness of a few people, draw with actual environmental deprivation on the ground.

It is crucial to distinguish slick, prestige filmmaking on ecological issues from actual strife-driven cinema geared towards exacting environmental impact. Speaking up for high-ticket issues such as climate change or wildlife preservation is trendy today, but the actual work on the ground is done by unfancied people. Saud and Shehzad, or Bomman and Bellie, are outliers; most of those who work on the ground rarely qualify for the preferable cinematic criteria of a tragic backstory

OPPOSITE PAGE: **A still from the film *All That Breathes*, released in 2022. It tells the story of the brothers Mohammad Saud and Nadeem Shehzad, who run a wildlife rescue clinic in north-east Delhi.**

LEFT: **A still from the film *All That Breathes*. Directed by Shaunak Sen, the film was nominated for the Academy Award for best documentary feature film.**

here or a socio-ethnic context there. Moreover, the mere consumption of underdog heroism rarely translates to participation; the convenient transfer of the onus of change remaining with those who already, despite great odds, are doing something. Giddy celebrations of topical stories can also, thus, obscure harsh truths about our inertness or lack of motivation in addressing our role in ecological deprivation. As long as someone else is doing it, we might as well not care.

"Sometimes there is this over romanticized, bleeding-heart sentimentality about environmentalism, that I don't have a lot of patience for," Sen told the *New Indian Express* in a recent interview. "What drew me to the brothers was that they have a wry, unsentimental way of soldiering every day while witnessing ecological devastation at a scale that is unimaginable for most of us." Sen has repeatedly claimed that he never set out to make an environmental or a "wildlife conservation" film. His endeavour, as is illustrated by the philosophical musings of the film's voiceover, is to intellectualise Delhi's choking air, its near-violent disintegration. His subjects, however, are, in principle, conservationists.

Conservation, even in the context of filmmaking, is a thankless job that many have devoted their lives to without attracting similar recognition. "Television documentaries are more about entertainment than creating lasting impact," the veteran conservation filmmaker Shekar Dattatri told me over the phone, from somewhere near the Morni Hills, in Haryana. Over patchy cellular reception, Dattatri explained to me the challenges of chasing tangible impact. He started out as a natural-history documentary filmmaker in the 1980s but became a conservation filmmaker by the turn of the millennium. "A conservation film can be made even on a shoestring budget," he said. "Expensive equipment is not necessary, as even a smartphone can suffice at times. The point is to convey a well-researched message succinctly to the people who can effect change through administrative action."

According to Dattatri, the landscape of wildlife filmmaking changed at the turn of the millennium. Following India's neoliberal turn, broadcast filmmaking helped illuminate the country's wilderness but, other than consumption as entertainment, it probably never materialised as impact. "I quit making films for broadcast in favour of grassroots conservation filmmaking as I was not convinced that TV films could bring about tangible change on the ground," Dattatri said. "In order to achieve positive change, you need to reach the key decision-makers who have the power to do something about an issue."

The rise of "white wildlife performers," Dattatri told me—referring to the late Steve Irwin, an Australian conservationist who was popularly known as The Crocodile Hunter—drove the audience away from the monastic pleasure of at least famil-

RIGHT: A still from the film *The Elephant Whisperers*, released in 2022. The film explores the bond between Raghu, an orphaned elephant calf, and his human caregivers, Bomman and Bellie.

OPPOSITE PAGE: A still from the film *The Elephant Whisperers*. Directed by Kartiki Gonsalves, the film was nominated for the Academy Award for best documentary short film.

iarising themselves with the wild. Wildlife filmmaking suddenly became an adventure sport, with imitators seeking to replicate the adrenaline rush of manufacturing human-animal conflict, even as, on the ground, people were working towards solving it. "New technologies, exemplary picture quality has now culminated in a fresh interest in recapturing the wild," Dattatri said. It is more of a technological trend, he noted, as opposed to a sociological one.

Compared to the documentary format, mainstream cinema around ecological issues is even rarer. Symptomatic evidence suggests it is a case of will, as opposed to systemic roadblocks. "A story can be told in any genre," the director Amit V Masurkar told me. "It's up to the filmmaker to tell it in a way that suits their motive." Masurkar's breakthrough film, *Newton,* released in 2017, attempted to mainstream the plight of indigenous people living in the forests of Dandakaranya. His latest, *Sherni*, released in 2021, was the feminist story of a forest officer who tries in vain to rescue a tigress from poachers, miners and angry villagers. In both films, the forest is a character.

Masurkar believes there are enough people out there to support filmmaking around ecological concerns if there is sound craft behind the idea. He told me that the film was greenlit by the first studio that he and its writer, Aastha Tiku, pitched it to. Filming began within just four months, he added, "which only shows the interest and demand for films based on a topic that affects everyone severely." However, *Sherni* released on the streaming platform Amazon Prime, to great critical acclaim, instead of in mainstream theatres, where ethically and philosophically mature positions about wildlife and human–animal conflict are still rare. For example, SS Rajamouli's virile use of animals in the globally celebrated *RRR* interprets animals as armoury, a characterisation that has received wider approval. The two nominated documentaries, however, paint a more sensitive picture of beleaguered wildlife.

Sustenance and filmmaking geared to deliver impact are two separate journeys. Recognition and fame continue to be offshoots of Western acknowledgement. *The Elephant Whisperers*, for example, was available on Netflix in India long before the Oscar nomination nudged it into consideration for the national media. *All That Breathes* has premiered in Europe and North America but is still looking for a platform in the country of its origin. It is yet to have a public screening in Delhi, the city of its story, probably owing to the fact that it also touches upon the communal violence of 2020. Sen's first documentary, *Cities of Sleep,* released in 2015, about the mafias who control the way the underprivileged of Delhi sleep, travelled to festivals around the world but never secured distribution within the country. Documentaries are hard sells, more so if they intend to ask pertinent, provocative questions of those in power.

The shakedown of the BBC's offices after the release of the documentary *India: The Modi Question* is the latest evidence that, beyond structural impediments, there is also a climate of intimidation and censure that awaits the desire to interrogate institutions. Both *All That Breathes* and *The Elephant Whisperers* mitigate institutional realities that deserve harsher, more focussed questioning. By turning to the promise of kind, heroic people, these films compensate for the viewer's inability to act, let alone agitate. In both films, there are benevolent, suitably strained protagonists to whom we can safely, and rather slyly, assign the burden of exacting change. They will do for us, what we cannot do ourselves.

The cost of creating impact is a make-or-break consideration. “If you are good at what you do and have the right industry connections, you can make a decent living out of wildlife filmmaking,” Dattatri, who turns 60 this year and has remained unmarried, said. “However, it is very hard to sustain oneself purely from making conservation films. I’m not sure I would have been able to manage financially if I had been required to support a family.” Commissioning in the conservation filmmaking space, he explained, is now limited to a handful of non-governmental organisations or someone personally interested in creating visual stories around a specific purpose—that, too, only if you are good at what you do. Institutional support that previously aided modest efforts of documentation has also declined in recent years. Last year, the Film Division of India, responsible for some of the most important documentaries to be made since Independence, was merged, alongside other independent film bodies, with the National Film Development Corporation. The creative fallout of this decision is yet to fully express itself, but the broad strokes do not look promising.

Impact is a philosophical destination in itself but, within the corridors of bureaucracy, it does have tangible touchpoints. In the Nilgiris, where *The Elephant Whisperers* is set, elephants continue to die of electrocution while the government mulls whether it should have a statutory body for their protection. In other places, laws exist but not the will to see them through. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 safeguards the interest of India’s indigenous people, but its implementation across the country has been underwhelming. Deforestation, coupled with crony industrialisation, of highly susceptible ecological zones has resulted in disaster after disaster. In Himachal Pradesh’s Kinnaur district, for example, tribal people have spent more than a decade protesting the rampant greenlighting of hydroelectric projects in the region. In Uttarakhand, landslides have grown manifold since the controversial Char Dham Highway project was launched. The sinking of Joshimath, a small town in the state, is an early symptom of the possibly catastrophic outcome of burdening mountains and their wildlife. In Joshimath, the only way back now seems to be out.

Both *All That Breathes* and *The Elephant Whisperers* use contrasting cinematic grammar to illustrate the delicate balance between humans and animals, and the modern struggle to co-exist. In the former, these invisible boundaries suddenly become visible, while *The Elephant Whisperers* transports us to a place where the animal is, for once, not an ecological afterthought. The unblinking heroism of Saud, Shehzad, Bomman and Bellie, however, also unwittingly obscures a reality that deserves to be questioned more aggressively, especially through the people responsible for shaping it. The onus of heroism, or humanity so to speak, should be distributed.

“More filmmakers are making films on environmental issues as it is the biggest threat we as a planet are facing today,” Masurkar said. “The need for films on the topic is more urgent today than ever before.” It remains important, though, to understand that topical empathy does not necessarily translate to tangible change. “In my opinion, a handful of empowered decision-makers can make more of a difference than millions of passive, powerless television viewers,” Dattatri said. ■

MODI'S MESSENGER

S Jaishankar as the voice of India's
Hindu nationalist foreign policy

COVER STORY / GOVERNMENT

ERAM AGHA

BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

PTI

WHEN THE FOREIGN SECRETARY, Sujatha Singh, got a call from the external-affairs minister's office in January 2015, she knew something was up. Sushma Swaraj wanted to set up a meeting for 2 pm on 28 January but would not say what the meeting was about. This was unusual and enough to make Singh wary. When she went in, she tried to keep up appearances and began briefing the minister about the next day's plan. But, before long, Swaraj conveyed the disappointing news. Prime Minister Narendra Modi wanted to replace her as foreign secretary, with Subrahmanyam Jaishankar. She would not serve a full two-year term, which was to end in six months.

When she described this sequence of events to the journalist Karan Thapar, Singh's voice was heavy with emotion. The news of her curtailment had made headlines—it was a shocking and rare development in the history of the Indian Foreign Service. The only other time a foreign secretary had been unceremoniously replaced was in 1987. AP Venkateswaran had a reputation for being blunt and not being a pliant bureaucrat; he was known, for instance, to have differences with various officials, including the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi—on sending the Indian Peace Keeping Force into Sri Lanka. In a televised interview, Gandhi finally dropped a bomb: "Soon you will be talking to a new foreign secretary." Venkateswaran resigned before he could be officially dismissed.

The news of Singh's dismissal would not have been quite as surprising to her as it must have been for Venkateswaran. "There were bets being laid even before this government was sworn in that I will be one of the first secretaries to go," she told Thapar. In December 2014, she said, a civil servant in the prime minister's office had hinted at the possibility of another job for her. Singh had stated clearly that she was not interested in any other job. After she was intimated about Modi's decision, Singh wrote a letter stating that she was seeking early retirement "as instructed by the Prime Minister." She told Thapar that she soon received a call from the prime minister's office, asking her to delete the reference to Modi's instruction. She did not agree to this, because this was not a voluntary decision.

Speculations swirled in the media about why the prime minister wanted her out, including Modi's unhappiness with the way she handled matters with Israel, her closeness with the Congress president, Sonia Gandhi, and her working style. But the reasons for her enforced retirement were never made clear. What was clear, however, was that the prime minister was in a hurry to install Jaishankar in her stead.

Jaishankar was meant to retire on 31 January that year—the usual age of retirement for IFS officers is 60. Three days before his retirement, Modi gave his career a second wind. Jaishankar not only served the full term as foreign secretary, until 2017, but got a one-year extension. The union government had amended the service rules to include that "the central government may, if deemed necessary, give an extension in service for a further period not exceeding one year … to the foreign secretary." After Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party returned to power with an overwhelming mandate, in May 2019, Jaishankar was appointed the minister of external affairs—the first time a foreign secretary has held the position—succeeding Swaraj. A little over a month later, he was elected to the Rajya Sabha on a BJP ticket from Gujarat. Jaishankar calls himself an "honorary Gujarati since 2019."

There were good reasons for Modi to want to elevate Jaishankar to the crucial position of foreign secretary. BR Muthu Kumar, a former diplomat and Jaishankar's roommate at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, told me that word had spread in diplomatic circles that Modi was unhappy at the list of names suggested to him as guests for Republic Day in 2015. He is said to have grumbled, "*Koi khas mehman nahin hain?*"—Is there no special guest? At the time, Jaishankar was the ambassador to the United States. According to the journalist Seema Sirohi, he went to the White House and tried to convince a senior advisor to Barack Obama that the US president's visit would be a historic opportunity. He showed the advisor videos of the Republic Day parade on his phone. It worked out. "He read his mind and gave him Obama," Kumar said. "Any PM would love to have him." More than any other Indian prime minister, perhaps, it was a big deal for Modi to have the US president visit.

"Foreign policy is not controversial," BR Muthu Kumar said. "Jaishankar has the understanding of what the master wants."

Relations with the US had been personally fraught. The United States had imposed a nine-year visa ban on Modi in 2005, the only time the country has ever done so, on grounds of "severe violations of religious freedom." In 2002, when he was the chief minister of Gujarat, horrific communal violence had played out in which, even by conservative estimates, over a thousand people were killed—the majority of them Muslim. While the ban was lifted after Modi became prime minister, and he made several visits to the country, Obama's attendance would be seen as further rehabilitation of his image on the international stage. Jaishankar's ease with Americans and long association with the United States was an undoubted asset for Modi.

In his recently published book, the former US secretary of state Mike Pompeo makes clear his preference for Jaishankar over Swaraj as foreign minister. "In our first meeting, I was bemoaning in very diplomatic speak, that his predecessor had not been particularly helpful," Pompeo writes. Jaishankar's alleged response to this was far from diplomatic. "He said he could see why I had trouble with his predecessor, a goofball and a heartland political hack." Jaishankar later told media that Pompeo was "disrespectful" towards Swaraj for calling her those words—even though the rest of the passage makes clear that it was he who had said them.

The mainstream media loves Jaishankar. He is glib, distinguished and seen as a straight shooter. He is typical of the dominant constituency within the foreign services—English-speaking, elite, upper-caste and male. As minister, he has adapted himself to what the Modi administration needs him to be. He makes all the right noises about nationalism, puts up a rousing defence of Indian civilisational values and fiercely shields the government from questions and criticism.

"Foreign policy is not controversial," Kumar said. "Jaishankar has the understanding of what the master wants."

THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS is notionally the government body responsible for executing the country's foreign policy. It has historically always worked closely with the prime minister's office and other ministries, such as defence and home affairs. It currently employs over eleven thousand people, and there are 202 missions and posts in countries all over the world. The foreign secretary is the most senior diplomat and administrative head of the ministry, and is supposed to be the principal advisor to the minister.

A country's foreign policy has many facets, but one of its main imperatives is the preservation of the national interest in the global order. In this sense, as the former US vice-president Hubert H Humphrey said, "foreign policy is really domestic policy with its hat on." The external-affairs minister, foreign secretary and the diplomatic corps convey the domestic ideas and priorities promoted by the government of the day.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: **Subrahmanyam Jaishankar waiting to speak at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in January 2014 in Washington. He was then ambassador to the United States.**

OPPOSITE PAGE: **In January 2015, the minister of external affairs Sushma Swaraj (right) had to deliver disappointing news to Sujatha Singh (centre). The Prime Minister Narendra Modi wanted to replace Singh as foreign secretary with S Jaishankar.**

Jaishankar had an illustrious career in the foreign services for over forty years. He served as an ambassador to the United States, China and the Czech Republic, and was appointed the high commissioner to Singapore. He was involved with the India–US nuclear deal in 2008 and is said to have played a significant role in defusing a conflict between India and China in 2017. "You see the career path, he was always given key postings," Yogender Kumar, a former Indian ambassador to Tajikistan, Namibia and the Philippines, told me. "It is because of his abilities." But, according to most others, he had some serious help along the way.

Several politicians and diplomats I interviewed said that, Jaishankar's father, K Subrahmanyam, considered the doyen of international strategic affairs, particularly India's nuclear strategy, greatly influenced his career. "It was all managed by his dad," Bharat Karnad, who served with Subrahmanyam on the the National Security Council, told me. When I expressed scepticism about how much influence Subrahmanyam could have had over deciding which postings his son would get, Karnad replied, "Oh enormous influence! He was the institutional memory in the government of India ... He was the defence production secretary. He was chairman of the joint intelligence committee. He was in all meetings. Jaishankar's father had the ear of the external-affairs minister. He had the ear of the prime minister. He managed his career very well."

Now, thanks to Modi, Jaishankar's political star has risen, a fact he acknowledges. "To become foreign secretary was the limit of my ambition," Jaishankar said at the launch of the Marathi edition of his book *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World*. "I had never even dreamt of becoming a minister. I am not sure any other prime minister other than Narendra Modi would have made me minister. I also sometimes ask myself, if he had not been prime minister, would I have the courage to enter politics? I don't know."

In return, Jaishankar has served Modi well. Modi has been seeking prominence on the global stage, and Jaishankar is paving the way. He is helping Modi rebrand Indian foreign policy in Hindu nationalist terms. This is most evident in the language he uses to talk about diplomacy and about building an "Indian strategic culture." In his book, and in various events and speeches, he has argued that most tenets of diplomacy can be found in ancient Hindu texts and epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The Hindu deities Krishna and Hanuman, he recently stated, were the world's "greatest diplomats." He routinely has unreserved praise for Modi. "Since 2014, Bharat and Bharat Niti"—Bharat policy—"has entered a new era, and you all know the reason why," he said at the launch of the Gujarati edition of his book. There is a concerted effort in foreign-policy speak to demonstrate a break from the past. Words like nonalignment, associated with Nehru, are very rarely used. And when they are, it is with dismissiveness.

"Mr Jaishankar seems to be more of a courier person than policy-maker in India, leading the MEA to do the bidding of the PMO, where the main policies and operations are decided between Modi, Amit Shah and Doval."

Many scholars of international relations have argued that, while the language of diplomacy might have changed, the foundational assumptions underpinning India's foreign policy have not. "Modi and his political allies made a deliberate and concerted effort to displace inherited understanding of India's policy in the world and how it ought to operate," Ian Hall writes in his book *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*. "Modi's government did less to change the direction of Indian foreign policy, its foundational assumptions and key practices, than might be suggested by all the drama and noise it generated." In the past ten years, there is a greater investment by the government in think tanks, which, in turn, appears to be bolstering the establishment's view of foreign policy. Jaishankar's son is the executive director of one such think tank.

According to the former diplomat MK Bhadrakumar, Jaishankar is today a "towering figure in the ruling circles and among the ministers," because his presence gives the current establishment a veneer of credibility. "He is part of a political party that is rather deficient in intellectual power," Bhadrakumar told me. "Now, whether he has the same conviction in the party ideology himself cannot be said. His intellectual constructs keep shifting. They lack in consistency." But intellectual conviction or what Jaishankar's true ideological affinity might be as a minister is beside the point. Bhadrakumar pointed out Jaishankar's good equation with the former prime minister Manmohan Singh as a case in point. "He is an extraordinarily intelligent man," Bhadrakumar said. "He can decipher what is expected of him and can adapt himself repeatedly."

More importantly, Jaishankar, first as foreign secretary and now as minister, has helped consolidate Modi's hold over the operations of foreign policy. According to various diplomats I spoke to, the foreign ministry is doing very little foreign policy. Decision-making power on China lies with the China Study Group, an informal group of top officials that is usually headed by the foreign secretary but, for the past few years, has been convened and run by the national security advisor, Ajit Doval. India's relations with Pakistan, Russia, Afghanistan and Myanmar are also mostly administered through the NSA.

Soon after making Jaishankar foreign minister, Modi upgraded the post of NSA to the rank of cabinet minister. Doval was reappointed to the position, this time in a class with members of the cabinet committee on security, which includes Jaishankar; the home minister, Amit Shah; the defence minister, Rajnath Singh; and the finance minister, Nirmala Sitharaman. While Doval is working on Modi's foreign-policy mandate behind the scenes, Jaishankar is the mouthpiece.

"Mr Jaishankar seems to be more of a courier person than policy-maker in India, leading the MEA to do the bidding of the PMO, where the main policies and operations are decided between Modi, Amit Shah and Doval," Kanak Mani Dixit, a prominent Nepali writer and editor, told me. "This is how I see it in Kathmandu."

"The picture one gets today is that MEA is transforming and functioning more like, say, the Chinese foreign ministry, where policies are imbued with the ruling party's ideology," Bhadrakumar said. "It is a subtle transformation, but how systemic it is remains to be seen. The point is, traditionally, the foreign-service cadre was invested with a high degree of professionalism." In an article exploring how Indian diplomats are adjusting to an era of Hindu nationalism, Kira Huju, a fellow in international relations at the London School of Economics, argues that "career diplomats are caught in a double bind." Hindu nationalism, she writes, "represents a rejection of much of the foundational dogma and diplomatic tradition that have defined the IFS since independence in 1947. Yet saffronization also promises its own kind of diplomatic elite circulation: the once dominant Anglophone class of diplomats is to be replaced by a new Indian elite invested in Hinduism, the Hindi language and a narrower sense of nationalistic pride."

Foreign policy has always been a centralised operation with little parliamentary oversight, but it has never before been quite so partisan. "Foreign policy was always a shared idea that everybody contributed to," Salman Khurshid, a former external-affairs minister, told me. "We used to have all-party consultations. Whether you finally agreed or not, it started with discussion—what we are doing with Pakistan, the nuclear deal, everything. There was consensus, or at least an attempt for consensus." Under previous administrations, as Yashwant Sinha, another former external-affairs minister, pointed out to me, delegations would be made up of members from opposition parties. Narsimha Rao handpicked Atal Bihari Vajpayee to lead the Indian delegation to the Human Rights Council in 1994, and Indira Gandhi sent JP Narayan to plead India's case during the East Bengal crisis. Modi did no such thing when the Russia–Ukraine crisis erupted.

"Foreign policy is being pursued from a national-security perspective," PS Raghavan, a former diplomat and chairperson of the National Security Advisory Board, told me. I asked him who was more prominent in decision-making, Jaishankar or Doval. "Actually, one person takes the final decision," he said. "It is neither a Jaishankar doctrine nor a Doval doctrine. It is the Modi doctrine." But, according to Sinha, the presence of the NSA further erodes the independence of the foreign ministry. "Every prime minister in India is hands-on and directly guides foreign policy,"

BELOW: **K Subrahmanyam, Jaishankar's father, was considered the doyen of international strategic affairs, particularly India's nuclear strategy. He greatly influenced his son's career.**

COURTESY YOUTUBE

PTI

ABOVE: While national security advisor Ajit Doval (centre) is working on Modi's foreign-policy mandate behind the scenes, Jaishankar (left) is the mouthpiece.

Sinha said. But, "now with the national security advisor attached to the prime minister's office, it's become even worse. The NSA is interfering in foreign policy."

Jaishankar is an effective BJP spokesperson for India's diplomatic affairs. He had his work cut out for him the moment he became minister. Since 2019, the Modi government has effected foundational shifts to the Constitution, such as the abrogation of Article 370, which gave special status to Jammu and Kashmir, and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, which could potentially disenfranchise Muslims. These, along with various other economic and political issues, have received condemnation from all over the world. As a result, a considerable amount of energy is spent denouncing international reports that question the shrinking of democracy or raise questions about Modi's past as interference in India's "internal matters." Over the past few years, India has "rejected" concerns raised by, among others, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom on the treatment of minorities in the country, the German foreign ministry on press freedom, a BBC documentary on Modi's role in the 2002 Gujarat violence, the World Press Freedom Index that ranked India 150 out of 180 countries, the Global Hunger Index that put the country at 107 out of 121, the World Health Organization's estimate of India's COVID-19 death toll, the World Bank's report on Human Capital Index that measured economies on various parameters including health and education, the Freedom House Index's downgrading of India's democratic status as "partly free" and V-Dem's report that India was resembling an "electoral autocracy."

The response, often coming from Jaishankar himself, has been spirited and predictable. In April 2022, in a meeting in which Jaishankar was present, Anthony Blinken, the US secretary of state, said, "We regularly engage with our Indian partners on these shared values [of human rights] and, to that end, we are monitoring some recent concerning developments in India including a rise in human-rights abuses by some government, police and prison officials." Later, Jaishankar attributed the criticism to US lobbies and vote banks, and said that India, in turn, had concerns about human-rights abuses in the United States.

Jaishankar frames most things as a "battle for narratives." In a recent podcast interview with the journalist Smita Prakash, he said, "There will be narratives designed to damage us. We have to put out narratives designed to expose people." His way of doing this leans heavily on whataboutism, deflection and shifting goalposts. When speaking about the number of COVID-19 deaths that took place in India, he asked if people had not died in other countries. When asked about the border crisis with China, he spoke about the 1962 Sino-Indian War, in which India lost territory under a Congress government. About the BBC documentary on Modi, he asked why one had not been made on the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom. (The BBC had, in fact, broadcast a documentary on the subject.) Calling it the "drip drip drip" of a bad-faith ideological agenda, Jaishankar suggested to Prakash that most questions put to the Modi government were politics by other means. "Sometime, politics of India does not originate in its borders, it comes from outside," he said to Prakash. "Ideas come from outside, agenda comes from outside."

"Jaishankar has a complex personality," Bhadrakumar said. "He can outsmart you in a debate but then he forgets that he is no longer debating in JNU. You have to carry people along, especially foreigners. Again, diplomacy often means keeping the thought to yourself. Jaishankar has a propensity to market himself and gets carried away."

This year is a crucial one for diplomacy. India has assumed the presidency of the G20—an intergovernmental platform consisting of 19 countries and the European Union. The presidency rotates every year among the member states, but the Modi government has promoted it as a "historic opportunity" for the country and allocated ₹990 crore to it in the budget—outside the allocation for the ministry of external affairs. Meetings will be held across 56 locations in the country. The logo is the world resting inside a lotus—the BJP's electoral symbol—with the message "*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*," or the world is one family.

Jaishankar has been doing his part in talking it up. "I sometimes get the question, you can imagine from which quarters, saying, 'Well, it was bound to come your way anyway, so what's the big deal?' It is a very big deal. Because, in our diplomatic history, we have never had this many powerful nations—the top 20 economies of the world, who among them today account for the bulk of the global GDP, to dominate world trade—their leaders, come to India." Jaishankar said this was an opportunity for "marketing of India to the world." It is also, as Sinha wrote in the *Indian Express*, another chance to showcase Modi to India in an election year.

WHEN INDIA GAINED its independence, in 1947, the world was in a moment of flux. The Second World War had recently ended and, after the long upheaval, many countries were rebuilding from the ruin and devastation. The United Nations had been established to promote international peace and cooperation. In this new world order, the United States and the Soviet Union were emerging as power blocs and were engaged in a competition for global dominance, including through diplomacy, propaganda, space wars and the arms race. The Cold War would go on to shape global politics for much of the rest of the century.

As a fledgling country in a transforming world, India did not have prior scripts to rely on to forge international relations. The Indian government wanted to move away from relations as they were under the colonial system and not take sides in the Cold War. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru crafted a new direction, giving India its foundational principles of foreign policy.

At the United Nations General Assembly, in 1948, Nehru articulated his vision. "The world is something bigger than Europe, and you will not solve your problems by thinking that the problems of the world are mainly European problems," he said. "There are vast tracts of the world which may not, in the past, for a few generations, have taken much part in world affairs. But they are awake, their people are moving and they have no intention whatever of being ignored or of being passed by." He spoke about racial equality, India's support for the struggle against imperial domination in other parts of the world, and prioritising hunger and the economic concerns of developing countries.

Nehru became one of the leading figures in developing a third way of engaging with the world through the Non-Aligned Movement. The NAM was guided by the principles of sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in domestic affairs, equality and peaceful coexistence. Often erroneously identified as passive or indifferent today, it allowed India to have a range of proactive and independent bilateral relations—"friendship with all countries," as Nehru put it—as well as to advocate with them on human rights and democratic principles. He was hailed as a visionary for creating a foreign-policy framework that was imbued with moral imperatives but also realistically grounded in national interests. "Whatever policy we may lay down," he had said in 1947, "the art of conducting the foreign affairs of a country lies in finding out what is most advantageous to the country."

"Jaishankar has a complex personality," Bhadrakumar said. "He can outsmart you in a debate but then he forgets that he is no longer debating in JNU."

The foundations for the NAM were laid at the Bandung conference—a meeting of 29 African and Asian countries, many of them newly independent—in 1955. That year, Jaishankar was born to Subrahmanyam and Sulochna in Tamil Nadu. Subrahmanyam was at the start of his career, part of the administrative cadre of Madras. His later writings suggest that he saw the NAM as pragmatic. He argued that, far from being an ideology, the NAM was India's grand strategy.

The Nehru government's popularity eventually waned, particularly due to its China policy. India's initial policy towards its neighbour was marked by a desire for friendship and cooperation, and to diplomatically drive the region's security interests in the Cold War context. It became one of the first countries to recognise the communist government of the People's Republic of China, with which it signed the Panchsheel Agreement in 1954. Nehru was criticised for recognising China's suzerainty over Tibet, a buffer state between the two giants. The relationship became further distressed by the end of the decade. In 1956, the Tibetans launched an armed rebellion against China. There were clashes between Indian and Chinese soldiers. China wanted to renegotiate the entire border and India gave asylum to Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, raising Chinese suspicions about India's stance on Tibet. Things came to a head with India's military defeat in the Sino-Indian war of 1962, which was seen as a national humiliation. Nehru's detractors argued there were structural flaws in the NAM, since it became clear that there was no guarantee other countries would come to India's aid during war.

"Please look after my son," Natwar Singh recalled Subrahmanyam telling him. "You see, there are so many joint secretaries who just get lost in the crowd," Singh told me.

A subsequent war with Pakistan in 1965—a year after Nehru died—made the demand for a security angle stronger. A think tank called the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, funded by the defence ministry, was set up as an autonomous body that year. Subrahmanyam, who had recently returned from a fellowship at London, became its director about three years later and held the position until 1975. Many tenets and early ideals of the NAM began to be revised in this period. India beefed up its military power and pushed a nuclear-weapons programme. In 1974, the Indira Gandhi government conducted a nuclear bomb test in Rajasthan. While it won her popularity domestically, it set off alarm bells in the international community. It led to US sanctions against India and the creation of the Nuclear Suppliers Group to check international nuclear proliferation.

In the meantime, India was also deepening relations with the Soviet Union, on which it could rely to get cheap military equipment. Jaishankar entered the IFS around this time, with an early posting in Moscow, between 1979 and 1981, followed by four years as the undersecretary for the Americas at the ministry of external affairs. "My generation and those before carried into our profession the heavy baggage of difficult experiences with the US, China and Pakistan," he writes in his book. "The first half of my diplomatic career was dominated by two geopolitical realities: The Cold War and the rise of political Islam."

Yogender Kumar, who was Jaishankar's contemporary, remarked how it was so rare for a young diplomat to get stationed or have deep engagement with such politically important places. He told me Jaishankar had distinguished himself because of his intellect. He had a master's degree in political science and a doctorate in international relations from JNU before he joined the IFS. "Right from the beginning, he was highly admired for his acumen," Kumar said. "His reading of international affairs was very deep. Even before he went as a diplomat, he had a good idea about international relations, while others learnt on the job." It was not unusual for "seniors to find somebody extraordinary in talent and start grooming them," Kumar said, "but he got some key countries in crucial times." Multiple people told me this was thanks to his father.

"Subrahmanyam was a principled man," Karnad told me. He had demonstrated the capacity to resist political pressure, particularly when Indira Gandhi declared a draconian state of emergency across the country, between 1975 and 1977. "At the time of Emergency, Subbu was in Tamil Nadu," Karnad said. "And, as Tamil Nadu home secretary, he refused to jail the people the Indian government had asked him to. He said he has no right to do that and got into their bad books." In the podcast with Prakash, Jaishankar said that, once Indira Gandhi returned to power, in 1980, his father was removed as the secretary of defence production.

By 1991, the world was a very different place. The Cold War had ended, the Soviet Union had collapsed and global politics had moved away from its bipolarity to US dominance. India opened up its economy, heralding a new phase of rapid privatisation, and recalibrated foreign relations. The Narasimha Rao government sought new diplomatic partners in what it called India's "Look East" policy. This was pursued by other governments as well. (The Modi administration renamed it the "Act East" policy in 2014.) Later, the IK Gujral government advocated for non-transactional relationships with neighbouring countries based on trust and mutual respect for each other's sovereignty.

Politically, it was an era of coalition politics and the rise of regional parties. The Congress was losing its foremost position and the Hindu Right was rising as a political force throughout the decade, particularly after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. The BJP, led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, formed the government three times in the decade.

The second and third term of the Vajpayee tenure saw tumultuous events. Within two months of the BJP coming to power, in 1998, India conducted nuclear tests, announcing to the world that it was a de facto nuclear state. Despite this causing considerable strain to

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ABOVE: **Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser speaking at the Bandung conference in 1955. The foundations for the Non-Aligned Movement were laid at Bandung conference—a meeting of 29 African and Asian countries, many of them newly independent.**

relations with the United States, Vajpayee was able to pull off a much-publicised visit by President Bill Clinton. The hijacking of flight IC-814, in 1999, and the 2001 attack on the parliament building heightened the domestic conversation on terrorism and converged with the US war on terror.

After the anti-Muslim pogroms in Gujarat, in 2002, Subrahmanyam wrote a scathing article titled, "Rama cannot be venerated by those who transgress Dharma by killing innocents." He wrote, "Today's ethics, formulated by the constitution, is secularism—that is the yuga dharma. Violators of it cannot be considered Hindus; they can only be looked upon as enemies of the Hindu way of life … Dharma was killed in Gujarat. The administrators who failed to protect the innocent citizens are guilty of adharma and if Rama had been alive he would have used his bow against the 'asura' rulers of Gujarat."

WHEN NATWAR SINGH was appointed the minister of external affairs in the Manmohan Singh government, in 2004, Subrahmanyam came to see him. At the time, Jaishankar was joint secretary for the Americas. Joint secretaries are responsible for heading a wing allocated to them, and are considered middle-level management in the ministry. "Please look after my son," Natwar Singh recalled Subrahmanyam telling him. "You see, there are so many joint secretaries who just get lost in the crowd," Singh told me. "He was in that kind of job. As ministers we deal with the foreign secretary more often." He assured Subrahmanyam that Jaishankar would be taken care of. "Don't worry!" Singh said he told him. "I knew his father well."

The two terms of the Manmohan government saw a period of sustained economic growth and a push for deeper integration with the global economy. Singh emphasised the country's economic and developmental priorities as the basis on which foreign relations would be conducted. The government signed several deals related to trade and investment with various countries, including Afghanistan, China and Australia. But the most historic deal was the Indo-US nuclear deal of 2008.

It was a watershed moment in India's diplomatic relationships. In 2005, Manmohan Singh and the US president, George W Bush, signed an agreement in which India agreed to separate its civil and military facilities, and place its civil facilities under the International Atomic Energy Agency's safeguards. It allowed India to import uranium

ABOVE: **Zhou Enlai, premier of the People's Republic of China and Prime Minister being cheered by crowds in China. India's initial policy towards its neighbour was marked by a desire for friendship and cooperation, and to diplomatically drive the region's security interests in the Cold War context.**

BETTMANN / GETTY IMAGES

from the United States and sign several civil nuclear cooperation agreements with other countries. Politically, the deal was vehemently opposed by the BJP and the Left, which withdrew its support from the government. Many saw it as a loss of strategic autonomy and an increased dependence on the United States on their terms.

For Subrahmanyam, the deal was a symbol of India "opening up to the rest of the world." For him, it was not simply a question of advancing the relationship between the two countries. "Through this deal," he wrote in *India Today*, in December 2006, "the US leads the entire industrial world and some major developing countries to free India from the technology apartheid it has been subjected to over the last three decades." Ashley Tellis, who was, at the time, a senior advisor to Nicholas Burns, the US undersecretary of state for political affairs, told me that Subrahmanyam "understood intuitively that the deal was an enormous opportunity for India to cross the NPT divide from being a target of global sanctions to becoming a part of 'the nuclear haves.'"

The deal was a very important milestone in Jaishankar's career. "At the level of diplomacy," Tellis said, "both S Jaishankar and Shyam Saran were indispensable to negotiating the deal." Saran was the foreign secretary and leading the negotiations with Burns. "Jaishankar, a PhD on the politics of nuclear proliferation from JNU, was the 'facts man' on the inside, and the 'narrative man' on the outside," Sirohi writes in her book. "He gave 'exclusive' briefings to key reporters in Washington and Delhi, making each one feel only *they* had the story." While Jaishankar's contributions, by most accounts, were significant, it is an exaggeration to claim he was the "architect" of the deal, as the mainstream media often does. "He was an outstanding joint secretary," Natwar Singh told me. "He was not a policymaker. There were people higher up doing it. Jaishankar was doing the groundwork, telling us about the important things that America is likely to raise, and preparing briefs."

"Jaishankar was one of the players, certainly not the main," TP Sreenivasan, the former governor for India of the International Atomic Energy Agency, told me. "His role was taking care of convincing Americans and moving forward … Having dealt with Americans that time, he knows he is a friend of America. It is an advantageous position—they understand him, and he understands them."

The second term of the Manmohan Singh government coincided with a global recession. India remained relatively unscathed, and by then was recognised as a major economy, allowing the country to project itself as a significant player in international relations. After Obama became president of the United States, Singh was one of the first world leaders invited to visit him. "This visit will be the first state visit of the administration and will highlight the strong and growing strategic partnership between the United States and India, and the friendship between the American and Indian people," the White House announced. Relations between the two countries were not quite so rosy, however. The United States was unhappy about India's ties with Iran and Russia, and India was not thrilled about US support for Pakistan.

Through much of Singh's second term, Jaishankar was posted as an ambassador to China, from 2009 to 2013. During this period, Modi made several visits to the country. According to Yashwant Sinha, this is where the two formed an association that proved to be mutually beneficial. "There are things diplomats do as an ambassador, but there is always a little extra that you can do," Sinha said. "If you are worldly wise you will do that little extra in order to ingratiate yourself."

A journalist working with an Indian news agency in Beijing during that period recalled that Jaishankar held an informal meeting of Indian journalists with Modi at his residence. Jaishankar helped Modi form important business associations. On his visit to China in November 2011, Modi promoted "Brand Gujarat" to prominent Chinese investors, calling on them to invest in power projects and infrastructure in the state. Modi invited them to participate in the Gujarat global investors' summit that was to be held in 2013. Jaishankar, along with other embassy officials, accompanied him to these meetings.

The current president of the Gujarat Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Pathik Patwari, told me how stories of Jaishankar in China percolated into the business community. "Jaishankar kept the two traditional rivals, India and China, on cordial terms," Patwari said. "He was always warm, resourceful and available for industrialists who wanted to expand their trade with China."

Modi and Jaishankar made an impression on each other, clearly winning each other's trust.

Jaishankar later described his first meeting with Modi as "different and unusual," remarking that the chief minister's interest in India's security and economic interests in relation to China, as well as his concern for three Gujarati citizens who had been imprisoned in the neighbouring country at the time, stood out for him. "And today, when I look at what is the difference he has made, he has really led a foreign policy which is much more security-focused, he has practiced diplomacy which is more development-focused. He has created people-centric policies in foreign policy."

It is difficult to say whether Jaishankar saw a future prime minister in Modi, but "that is not important," Sinha said. "He definitely saw him as a political leader of India and wanted to have bridges with him. And why not? When you are posted abroad, you get these opportunities in plenty. Important Indians come and you wine them, dine them and make friends."

Muthu Kumar said that "Modi never forgot that ambassador who pushed Gujarat's business delegation agenda." Jaishankar's help to Modi and Gujarat's business community stood him in good stead. I asked Patwari how other diplomats have fared compared to Jaishankar. "The elevation from the post of diplomat to minister of external affairs has all the answers to this question," he said.

MODI CAME TO POWER, in 2014, on the back of an intense media campaign that promoted him as a *vikas purush*—development man. The effort was necessary to distract from his tainted past. Questions about the 2002 violence pursued him, and his deep ties with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh were constantly highlighted. The RSS is the BJP's mother ship and is ideologically committed to Hindutva. Its ultimate goal has always been the creation of a Hindu Rashtra. The Modi government has advanced this goal faster than the RSS could have dreamed.

A key part of the Modi government's efforts goes into perception management. At home, Modi exemplifies a muscular nationalism and Hindu pride. Abroad, Modi is an ambassador of vasudhaiva kutumbakam. The RSS and the BJP have long been engaged in a project of rewriting history. Part of this involves the consistent denigration of Nehru and the institutions associated with him, the takeover of universities by RSS sympathisers and the discrediting of prominent historians and intellectuals. At the same time, there is a concerted effort to revive and rehabilitate a pantheon of Hindutva leaders, such as the former RSS chiefs MS Golwalkar and KB Hedgewar, who had stated fascist leanings, and the progenitor of Hindutva, VD Savarkar. This project is enhanced by a constant emphasis

> **"There are things diplomats do as an ambassador, but there is always a little extra that you can do," Yashwant Sinha said. "If you are worldly wise you will do that little extra in order to ingratiate yourself."**

on India's glorious civilisational past, recast in Hindu nationalist overtones.

The BJP manifesto for the 2014 election had a brief section on its foreign-policy vision. It had vague generalities about India's "soft power potential" and "ancient wisdom and heritage," which the Modi government would eventually harness into its Hindu brand of foreign policy. "India shall remain a natural home for persecuted Hindus and they shall be welcome to seek refuge here," the manifesto stated. Modi began a flurry of travels across the world and launched a high-decibel "Make in India" campaign to attract overseas investments. By adding Jaishankar to his foreign policy team in 2015, the Modi government's rebranding exercise began in earnest.

After a national executive party meeting in 2015, the BJP put out its resolution on foreign policy: "Our national ambition is Bharat's rise as a strong and respected world power." It described the five pillars of its foreign policy outlook as *panchamrit*, or five foods—*samman* (honour), *samvad* (dialogue), *samriddhi* (prosperity), *suraksha* (security) and *sanskriti evam sabhyata* (culture and civilisation). Much of the resolution was about how foreign policy had already been transformed thanks to Modi.

> Our foreign policy today reflects Bharat's age-old cherished cultural and civilizational values in a more significant and profound manner than ever before. While our approach is determined by the imperatives of the globalised world, it is also rooted in our inheritance of a timeless tradition of intellectual and economic engagement through peaceful co-existence. Prime Minister has restored pride in Bharat's civilisational identity and cultural traditions and drawn global attention to it in a manner that befits this oldest civilisation of the world.

"Hindu nationalist ideology has had a big impact on the way that India's foreign policy is presented, especially to domestic audiences, but its influence on policy itself is much less," Ian Hall told me. "We shouldn't be surprised by that: Savarkar, Golwalkar, Upadhyaya, and the other major Hindu national-

ist thinkers had little to say about foreign policy, beyond insisting India should build its power and promising India will one day fulfil its destiny as a *vishva guru*"—world leader.

In practical terms, most of the foreign-policy tenets under Modi are continuations from previous governments. But Jaishankar vigorously promotes the language Modi desires in making old concepts seem like new ideas. "What Dr Jaishankar is very good at doing is explaining this strategy using language that appeals to Hindu nationalists inside and outside India, as well as Indian nationalists more broadly, without unduly concerning India's major partners in the West and in East Asia," Hall said. "He does this by using concepts from the Mahabharata and other texts, weaving a Hindu nationalist narrative around what is essentially a pragmatic approach to foreign policy."

Modi skipped the NAM summit in 2016 and 2019—becoming the first Indian prime minister to ever do so, apart from the caretaker prime minister Charan Singh in 1979—prompting questions in the media if this signalled a policy shift for India. "Long-held assumptions and alignments rooted in the legacies of colonialism and the ideology of the Cold War are making way for new configurations and partnerships," Jaishankar said in 2019. But he argued that "India remains committed to the principles and objectives of the Non-Aligned Movement, including our long-standing solidarity and support for the Palestinian cause."

While not exactly dismissing the NAM in his book, Jaishankar appears to suggest something was lost in pursuing it. "Geopolitics and balance of power are the underpinning of international relations," he writes. "India itself has a tradition of Kautilyan politics that put a premium on them. If there are lessons from the near past, it is that these were not given the weightage that they deserved. The Bandung era of Afro Asian solidarity in the 1950s serves as a reminder of the costs of neglecting hard power. But more than lack of focus on capabilities, they reflect an underlying thinking. We have reached a league where the ability to protect our interests is an assumption, not just an option."

Modi did attend a virtual NAM summit in 2020, but members of government think tanks warned against any optimistic reading of his support for any Nehruvian policy. "The idea that is driving a lot of foreign policy discussion is the sense of India as a leading power, in contrast to merely a balancing one, which in some ways was the logic of NAM, of being away from major power blocs," Harsh Pant, the vice-president for studies and foreign policy at the Observer Research Foundation, told me. "The idea is to move beyond that balancing role and start projecting India as a leader that is capable and willing to provide solutions to critical global problems, be it in the realm of technology, climate, broader global governance and not merely saying its someone else's problem."

By the end of Modi's first term, the prime minister was exerting more control over foreign policy and had a more focussed attention on conveying a certain image abroad. According to Sinha, Jaishankar had already started acting like a foreign minister instead of the foreign secretary. He recalled to me what he described as the "most tragic scene" at the induction of Modi's cabinet in 2019. Sushma Swaraj had not contested the election, imagining that she would be elected to the Rajya Sabha. There was speculation on whether she would be inducted into the cabinet. On the day of the swearing in, she must have gone to the Rashtrapati Bhavan with some expectation. There was a place for seating cabinet ministers. "I am told she went in hoping someone will tell her to go take her place in the seating area but then, when she entered, she saw Jaishankar sitting," Sinha said. "She understood and quietly took her seat."

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"It is both an advantage and disadvantage when a technocrat becomes the minister," Sinha told me. "But policy requires political leadership, otherwise we can have the cabinet secretary as the PM of India." He had himself resigned from the Indian Administrative Service, in 1984, to join active politics as a member of the Janata Party. Sinha went through the political mill, he said, "*jisse dhakke khana kehte hai*"—being put through the ringer. When he became minister, "I daresay I acquired some political will." In comparison, he added, Jaishankar does not have that kind of background, having never gone through the "nitty-gritty of politics." And, because of that, according to Sinha, when he parrots the BJP's language, it does not "add to his credit … It looks like *chaploosi*"—flattery. "Coming from his mouth, the political language doesn't sound credible."

A right-wing intellectual affiliated to an RSS backed think tank told me that Jaishankar's social-media posturing is intently watched by his colleagues in the party. The intellectual told me

OPPOSITE PAGE: **In 1974, the Indira Gandhi government conducted a nuclear bomb test in Rajasthan. While it won her popularity domestically, it set off alarm bells in the international community.**

PUNJAB PHOTO / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

that Jaishankar's social-media is sometimes the subject of amusement among his peers, because it pits the ambitions of those who rise through the ranks in the party against outsiders who are inducted for being an "English speaking sartorial bureaucrat who can communicate India's narrative to the world." He does not think it can last long. "How far can he go from here?" he said. "*Ek din inka bhi namaste ho jaega*"—One day even he will be bid goodbye.

There are discussions, however, about Jaishankar's ambitions and whether he can have a bigger political role in the future. "I was sitting somewhere, and a senior leader from RSS-BJP said, 'Jaishankar could become the next big thing, he could be the prime minister,'" the right-wing intellectual recalled. The group fell silent when someone asked, "Why? He is an outsider." To this, the response was: "This is what Jaishankar thinks of himself. Like Ajit Doval and Amit Shah influence Modi, Jaishankar has started to do that in the case of foreign policy." For many, Jaishankar's performance does not guarantee any prospect for the 2024 general election, but they can see his use to the Modi government. "Tamil Brahmins are everywhere and here, he has established proximity to Modi," the right-wing intellectual said. "Keeping in mind the global audience, Jaishankar has everything to offer."

Jaishankar did not respond to my interview requests as well as a list of questions.

MODI'S SECOND TERM presented dramatic challenges for Jaishankar. The revocation of Article 370 had shocked the world, including the United States. The Modi government had deployed tens of thousands of additional soldiers to an already heavily militarised region, imposed a communications blackout and put political leaders and several others under "preventive detention." Prior arrangements had been made throughout Kashmir to quell protests. In December 2019, Pramila Jayapal, a US legislator of Indian origin, introduced a bipartisan resolution in the House of Representatives, urging the Indian government to adhere to international human-rights law and lift communication restrictions from the region.

The same month, Jaishankar visited the United States to participate in "2+2" dialogue with US officials. A meeting was set up to discuss the situation in Kashmir, which had several prominent congressional leaders, including Eliot L Engel, the chairperson of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Michael McCaul and Jayapal. According to a report in the *Washington Post*, Jaishankar demanded that the US lawmakers exclude Jayapal from the meeting—a demand they refused. Jaishankar cancelled the meeting, which Jayapal

JIM YOUNG / REUTERS

BELOW: In 2005, Manmohan Singh and the US president, George W Bush, signed an agreement in which India agreed to separate its civil and military facilities, and place its civil facilities under the International Atomic Energy Agency's safeguards.

OPPOSITE PAGE: The revocation of Article 370 had shocked the world. The Modi government had deployed tens of thousands of additional soldiers to an already heavily militarised region, imposed a communications blackout and put political leaders and several others under "preventive detention." Prior arrangements had been made throughout Kashmir to quell protests.

MUZAMIL MATTOO / ALAMY PHOTO

called a "missed opportunity." In a media interaction, Jaishankar said, "I have an interest in meeting people who are objective and open to discussion but not the people who already made up their minds." The strategy to shut out anyone who questions the government, while not very diplomatic, was consistent with India's domestic policy under the Modi administration.

Pant, the ORF vice-president, interpreted this move as Jaishankar standing up to a big power. "This is not just about Jayapal, you have to see this in the larger picture," he said. "A lot of time, the tone and tenor of Jaishankar's responses have been forceful. He is pushing back, and partly because, as foreign minister, this is sending a political response. He has spoken on a range of episodes. There is a pushback from the Indian establishment on what are considered to be key issues concerning India." He did not think this would jeopardise relations with the United States in any significant way. "Jayapal is not a politician who is deciding Indo-US relations," Pant said. "Jaishankar is someone who knows America very well … At the official level, Indo-US relations continue to be strong."

A few months before Jaishankar visited the United States, his son Dhruva became the executive director of ORF America. From 2016 to 2019, he was a fellow in Foreign Policy Studies at Brookings India in Delhi and the Brookings Institution in Washington. In an article for *The Caravan*, the independent journalist Urvashi Sarkar explored the conflict of interest. "There are strong suggestions that the ORF America director post was created for Dhruva," she told me.

The role of government-funded think tanks in advocating the government's foreign policy line has seen a notable increase in the past years. "'Foreign' think-tanks, like Carnegie and Brookings, both of which have opened offices in India and attracted large funding from Indian corporates, are no longer beyond the 'lakshman rekha' of foreign policy-making," the journalist Jyoti Malhotra wrote in 2017. "A second take-

"How far can he go from here?" the right-wing intellectual said. *"Ek din inka bhi namaste ho jaega"*—One day even he will be bid goodbye.

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CHINA CENTRAL TELEVISION (CCTV) / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

away from the MEA's new think-tank policy is that the money will follow policy briefs that 'are relevant to MEA policy-making.'"

Every year since its inception in 2016, the Raisina Dialogue, an annual conference on geopolitics, is hosted by ORF in partnership with the ministry of external affairs. The MEA allocated ₹1 crore to ORF in 2019 and 2020 for the organisation of the conference. "It is very natural, as India rises in global hierarchy, and wields more power and influence in the world, it needs to communicate its ideas to the world," Pant said about the annual conference. "Raisina as India's premier geopolitical conference allows a diverse range of stakeholders to come together to deliberate on matters of common concern. It allows India to provide a platform for ideational back-and-forth, in the classic Indian tradition of samvad."

Indeed, shaping narratives is now a key part of the foreign ministry's work. It is not always an easy task when things are said for domestic play but raise hackles outside. After the revocation of Article 370, Amit Shah had declared in parliament that Aksai Chin—a region administered by China but claimed by India—was part of Jammu and Kashmir. Beijing warned New Delhi to be "cautious in its words and deed" and to "avoid taking actions that further complicate the border issue." Jaishankar was sent to Beijing to mollify the Chinese. "There was no implication for the external boundaries of India or the Line of Actual Control with China," he said. "India was not raising any additional territorial claims. The Chinese concerns in this regard were misplaced." Jaishankar told the media that, when he was asked about the decision to revoke Article 370 and the increase in tensions with Pakistan, he told the Chinese, on both counts, that "this was an internal matter of India."

The next year, a clash took place in Ladakh's Galwan Valley, leading to the death of Indian soldiers—a first since the 1962 Sino-Indian War. As a result of the Ladakh crisis and how the Modi government has chosen to manage it, India has ceded a significant amount of territory to China. *The Caravan*'s October 2022 cover story details how India has not been demanding the restoration of the status quo as it existed before the crisis. This presents a public-relations problem for Jaishankar. Disengagement is being promoted as the resolution of the problem, whereas that still means a gain for China as it would get to keep the grounds it has occupied. Jaishankar repeated this idea when the opposition questioned the government on its indifference to the Chinese incursions. "If we were indifferent to China, who sent the Indian Army to the border?" Jaishankar said. "If we were indifferent to China, then why are we pressuring China for de-escalation and disengagement today? Why are we saying publicly that our relations are not normal?"

Jaishankar and the Modi government claims it has been acting tough with China. At the same time, trade with China is booming. A year after the Ladakh crisis, trade between the two countries increased by over forty percent, reaching a high of $125.62 billion. In 2022, this figure went up to $135.98

billion. The Chinese foreign minister, Wang Yi, came to Delhi for the first time since the crisis in March 2022. Very unusually, the ministry of external affairs made no prior announcements. "For whatever reason, the Chinese did not want this set of visits which Mr Wang Yi did to be announced earlier," Jaishankar later said. "So, since we did not have a mutual agreement, we did not make our announcement." Yi met Doval, and Jaishankar after that, before leaving for Kathmandu. Doval is the special representative to settle border issues with China.

I asked the former deputy NSA Arvind Gupta whether, with the situation in China, the national-security element seemed to be getting stronger in Modi's foreign policy. "When MEA coordinates, it has stronger diplomatic aspect," Gupta said. "Today, security aspect has become much stronger. After Modi came to power, the National Security Council has become stronger." He said the NSA now had as much decision-making power as the MEA. "There is no difference," he said. "They complement each other. The ministry of defence, ministry of external affairs, NSA and home ministry are typical to India security, and are now very closely coordinated." About Jaishankar, Gupta said, "He is present everywhere. He is engaging everywhere and he tweets himself. He is following what Mr Modi is doing."

"There are differences of views" on foreign policy, PS Raghavan told me. "All views of Doval, Jaishankar and Modi come up but one view prevails—decided by the prime minister." Raghavan described Doval and Jaishankar's respective roles. "During the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, Doval's role was to ensure that security prevailed," he said, while Jaishankar's role was to make sure that other countries recognise the "action as internal matter of India and do not interfere."

On 10 February, almost a year after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Doval met the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, in Moscow, at a meeting of secretaries of security councils and NSAs. Putin is said to have cleared the room of delegates to discuss bilateral discussions with Doval. This was the first time Putin met an Indian political leader, apart from prime ministers. Since 2001, Putin has reportedly not met a single foreign minister. "The meeting demonstrates Doval's high standing among national security professionals across the world and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's complete trust in his abilities," Nitin A Gokhale, a strategic affairs analyst, writes. "It is no secret that the India-Russia relationship over the past few years is primarily driven by Doval and his good friend Nikolai Patrushev, Putin's security czar."

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Meanwhile, Jaishankar was attending the World Hindi Conference in Fiji, co-hosted by the ministry of external affairs and the Fijian government. Jaishankar said the goal of the conference was to make Hindi a world language and a "Mahakumbh"—usually referring to a big religious gathering—for Hindi lovers.

BY FEBRUARY 2022, the signs of a drastic escalation of military conflict between Russia and Ukraine were all present. A few months earlier, satellite images had shown a massive build-up of Russian armed forces near the Ukraine border. Russia had demanded that the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation—a military alliance of 30 European and North American states—prevent Ukraine from ever joining NATO. The demand had been rejected as a "non-starter," since the NATO has an open-door policy.

By 10 February, the United States had issued guidelines warning its citizens to leave the country without delay. President Joe Biden even stated in a pre-recorded interview to NBC that "American citizens should leave now." On 15 February, the Indian embassy in Kyiv issued an advisory to its citizens, but not the highest-advisory level. "Indian citizens, particularly students, whose stay is not essential, may consider leaving temporarily," it stated. The number of Indian students studying in Ukraine was estimated to be up to twenty thousand. By 20 February, the German foreign ministry had, like the United States, also escalated its security warning, stating that "German nationals are urgently requested to leave the country now." Several other countries issued similar warnings.

KP Fabian, a former diplomat known for the evacuation in Qatar during the Kuwait crisis, told me that, in wartime, it cannot be left to people to make decisions about their safety themselves. "In a time of conflict, wording of the advisory has to be quite clear," he said. "We can't say 'go and figure out.' Just say it in plain English: 'Leave as early as possible.'"

Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February. The war has had a devastating impact on the region, with hundreds of thousands dead. A 21-year-old medical student from Karnataka later died during shelling. Modi called the Ukrainian president,

OPPOSITE PAGE: In 2020, a clash took place in Ladakh's Galwan Valley, leading to the death of Indian soldiers—a first since the 1962 Sino-Indian War.

Volodymyr Zelensky, on 26 February to find safe passage for the students. While speaking in parliament, a little over a month later, Jaishankar described Modi's intervention as *adbhut*—stunning. "He himself made a phone call. He spoke to the leaders of both the countries—Russia and Ukraine. There were two cities where our students were stuck. In those areas, he got the war stopped." Other BJP leaders and sympathisers had made the claim the India had created a temporary ceasefire for evacuation. The ministry of external affairs had to later clarify that Modi did not indeed stop the war.

Responding to a fellow MP, Jaishankar said, "NK Premachandran contrasted our advisory with the advisory of the Western countries. Now, I would like the honourable member to appreciate that Western countries had a political approach and political agenda, their advisory did not have the same intent which was ours—the welfare for the community concern. There was political game which they were playing, and, in our case, nobody did evacuation before we did." He did not explain what the political agenda might be in giving citizens a way out of an escalating conflict situation pre-emptively, nor how leaving the onus on citizens themselves to make uncertain decisions enabled their "welfare." Instead, he doubled down and said, "I want to tell, if our advisory's impact was nil, or not taken seriously, then how did four thousand citizens leave before the conflict? They left because they understood the importance of the advisory, they understood that. And we don't issue an advisory every day, and when any embassy says leave, people believe." He was talking about, at best, a fifth of the Indian population in Ukraine.

Instead of addressing questions about the serious lapses that took place in the evacuation process, Jaishankar fiercely defended Modi. "What was the impact of the PM speaking to the leaders of two countries?" he asked. Jaishankar said he was witness to the phone call made by Modi to the Russian president. "I was inside the room when he took up the issue with Putin saying that our students are in danger, there is firing happening. After that conversation, we got time to evacuate the students. Russians told us to go to places where there was no firing."

On 28 February, Modi chaired a meeting in which it was decided that four ministers— Hardeep Puri, Jyotiraditya Scindia, Kiren Rijiju and VK Singh—would be sent to the countries surrounding Ukraine, where a number of Indian citizens were being routed. The mission was called Operation Ganga. It turned the crisis into a publicity stunt. Many observers also noted the operation was cleverly named to strike a chord with people in Uttar Pradesh, who were going to vote in the upcoming assembly election. "I don't think it was a good idea to send our ministers to Ukraine," Fabian said. "The ambassadors can handle the job. And, when the ministers go, the embassy, staff gets additional responsibility to look after the minister. I don't think you get better cooperation just because you send the minister. That was done for headlines." In parliament, Jaishankar praised these ministers for "halving his workload by visiting the regions."

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The Ukraine evacuation, once decided, proceeded according to plan. Several ministers welcomed the students when they landed with "Vande Mataram" and "Bharat Mata ki Jai." Most students, traumatised by the war, did not pay them any attention. Jaishankar was not present in the welcome committee.

Tools from the "diplomatic arsenal" were not used, Fabian told me. "The decision was late," he said. India should have asked students to leave much earlier. And it should have drawn from successful experience of evacuations of the past. "During the evacuation in Kuwait and Iraq we did not care much about publicity," Fabian said. "We did not call it Operation Mesopotamia. It was all about doing our job. You do what is required."

There are many logistics to take care of in such emergencies. The onus falls on embassies, which, in turn, need direct support from the ministry of external affairs. This includes arrangement of food and shelter for thousands of citizens seeking safety. Often, the embassy will need money when it runs out of resources. "In Ukraine, there was some help from one or two Indian companies, but this option was not pursued and not taken as a serious matter to be explored," Fabian said. He said what was needed was "proactive diplomacy."

What happened instead was proactive nationalism. Months after the evacuation, in October, Jaishankar brought foreign ambassadors to Vadodara for Navratri celebrations. "When our students were leaving Ukraine holding the national flag, these days people recognised the flag and were aware that Indian students are getting help," he said at the event. "It is true some students from neighbouring countries also held our flag. Now think, they must have felt, 'There is something in this country … because of their flag even we are benefiting.'"

Since the Russian invasion, hostility between Moscow and Washington has intensified. India has been under pressure from the West to break ties with Russia, putting the country in an awkward position. "We have defence relations with Russia, and our regional security interests also converge," Pant said. "Russia is viewed by many in India as a nation that has stood by India during critical times." Pant went on to argue that, after the Cold War, "India is diversifying its defence supplies, and its economic ties with Russia have not really grown despite best efforts." In the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, as most countries have stopped trading with Russia, India has increased its import of oil, fertilisers and fuel from the country. Between April and August 2022, India's bilateral trade with Russia reached a record high of $18.2 billion, making it India's seventh largest trading partner.

ABOVE: **Since 2001, Putin has reportedly not met a single foreign minister but in February 2023 he met Ajit Doval, demonstrating the high degree of trust Modi puts in the NSA.**

ALEXEI NIKOLSKY / RIA-NOVOSTI, KREMLIN POOL PHOTO / AP

At the SCO Summit in Samarkand, in September, Modi told Putin that it was "not an era of war." Putin responded that he understood India's concerns but blamed Ukraine for the continuing crisis. The next month, in October, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution condemning the Russian annexation of Ukraine. India abstained from the vote, along with China, Pakistan and 32 others. One hundred and forty-three countries voted in favour. By January this year, Russia became India's fourth largest trading partner.

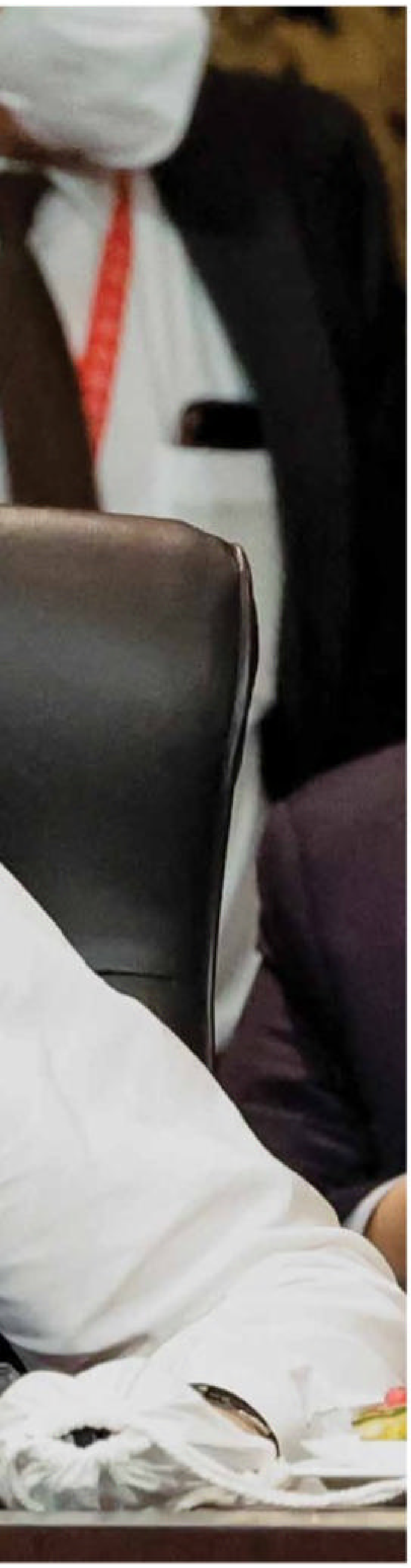
At the same time, Jaishankar has been persuading the United States of its position. According to Tellis, Jaishankar thinks both sides—India and the United States—are adjusting to the "pernicious realities of Russia's war in Ukraine." The United States, he told me, "understands that India's relations with Russia have deep historic roots," and "both are sides juggling with the tension between India's close relations with Washington and Moscow. There won't be a perfect equilibrium that can satisfy all. The West recognises the legacy of India–Russia relations—that India cannot jettison or reshape its ties overnight. It is a long process." Tellis added that Jaishankar "has persuaded the US that India's quest for strategic autonomy will not undermine American national interests. He has been able to conceptualise what autonomy means in ways that his American counterparts find persuasive."

Despite the Modi government and pro-government think tanks distancing from the NAM, it is proving to be a useful tool to explain India's position on most things. Jaishankar's aim to make India the predominant voice for the Global South is also in line with independent India's foreign-policy history. Salman Khurshid told me that it is easy to dismiss the NAM, since the context in which it arose is vastly different. "The balance that NAM supported, that balance has disappeared," he said. "But, with the Russian Ukraine war, suddenly we

felt that NAM is not such a bad idea, because we realised we can't take sides in the world and we have to be equidistant from both sides." In the September 2022 session of United Nations General Assembly, Jaishankar said that "India is on the side of peace and will remain firmly there. We are on the side that respects the UN Charter and its founding principles."

The beginning of Jaishankar's speech struck a more disconcerting note. He spoke of how India was in the process of "rejuvenating a society pillaged by centuries of foreign attacks and colonialism." The reference to "foreign attacks" would be immediately picked up by the Modi government's domestic constituency as referring to incursions by Mahmud of Ghazni and Mohammad Ghori—figures who have been resurrected to try and emphasise the terror of Muslim rulers and to show Muslim rule as an invasion of an essentially Hindu country.

Vivek Katju, a former foreign secretary, wrote in *The Hindu* that "this is perhaps the first time that the basic interpretation of Indian history of the current ruling dispensation has been projected in the UNGA, although in coded language." He called it "a dangerous path to undertake for domestic controversies are best avoided when national positions which have to be, necessarily rooted in the Constitution, are authoritatively articulated abroad. As a former diplomat, Mr. Jaishankar would be well aware of the Indian diplomatic tradition which has always presented nationally unified positions abroad, particularly at the UN and in multilateral forums."



WILLY KURNIAWAN / POOL PHOTO / AP

ABOVE: Subrahmanyam speaks with Modi at the G20 Leaders' Summit in Indonesia on 16 November 2022.

"He is a sensible, secular and democratic man," Pushpesh Pant, Jaishankar's former professor, told me. But, he added, "if you are at the pinnacle of your career, there may be a Faustian bargain to be made."

Jaishankar further laid out five pledges that Modi made for Indian citizens, declaring that it could be extrapolated for the rest of the world. These included liberating "ourselves from a colonial mindset" and taking pride in "our rich civilisational heritage." The charge of having a "colonial mindset" is in increasing circulation among the political class and is used against those who are constructed as English-speaking "anti-nationals," who raise questions about the government. "We should feel proud of our heritage, our culture, our forefathers," the former vice-president Venkaiah Naidu said in March 2022. "We must go back to our roots. We must give up our colonial mindset and teach our children to take pride in their Indian identity." The same phrase was used by a foreign-ministry spokesperson this year in reference to the BBC documentary on Modi.

Katju was troubled by Jaishankar's use of the phrase at the UN. "Words, phrases, arguments, exhortations are the tools of diplomacy," Katju wrote. "They cannot and should not be abandoned to promote domestic ideologies in external settings. Strong statements of a nationalistic flavour may win brownie points and popularity at home—and sometimes they are undoubtedly needed for diplomatic purposes too; however, facts, reason and logic as guides should never be overlooked."

Far from his days of diplomacy, Jaishankar's posture is now deeply belligerent, and he seems always ready to raise the spectre of colonialism. When the US billionaire investor George Soros said this February that international investors' faith had been shaken by reports of Gautam Adani's wrongdoings and his closeness with Modi, Jaishankar accused him of scaremongering. Jaishankar said he was worried because India knew the dangers of "outside interference" in politics. His words for Soros were ad hominem: "I could take the view that the individual in question Mr Soros is an old, rich, opinionated person, sitting in New York, who still thinks that his views should determine how the entire world works. Now if I could stop at old, rich and opinionated, I would put it away. But he is old, rich, opinionated and dangerous." Jaishankar called people like Soros dangerous because they invest resources in "shaping narratives."

As India heads into the 2024 general election, the BJP is heavily invested in shaping a narrative of its own. With the G20 summit set to take place in September this year, the Modi government wants to showcase to India that, under the prime minister's leadership, the country has arrived as a world leader. "Every prime minister realises [one] thing immediately," Sinha said. "Foreign-policy successes will get him much more visibility in India than any other kind of activity. In that sense foreign policy in India has become an extension of its domestic policy, and it has not been in any time more pronounced than Mr Modi's regime."

Jaishankar, for his part, has understood his assignment and successfully cast a strident and righteous tone for an international audience while signposting the BJP's mandate for his audience back home. Despite the new Hindu nationalist language, the basic form of conducting India's international relations remains much the same. There are, however, changes to the content. "India now tilts towards the West far more than it did a decade ago and it is much more vocal in articulating its vision for a multipolar Indo-Pacific," Hall told me. When Smita Prakash asked Jaishankar about India's increased closeness to the West, he responded: "Yes, we have very good relations with the US, generally the West. I don't think there is any reason to be defensive about it."

Jaishankar's path ahead as a politician is not clear. "He knows how to be in sync with the times," Bhadrakumar told me. "He is not a career politician, which is also good in a way because he can perform like a trusted bureaucrat who can cater to the needs of the political leadership and deliver with efficiency." An old friend and senior from his university days, Anand Kumar, has been watching Jaishankar's transformation with interest. According to him, Jaishankar elevated the "dignity of office with the kind of experience he has." But the transformation also worries Kumar. "He is part of the government that speaks the language of Hindutva and I pray he becomes a bad learner of that language," Kumar said. "It will be a bad day if he becomes the victim of myopia. I want him to fail in that transformation." Pushpesh Pant, a former professor of international relations in JNU who taught Jaishankar said there was the "factor of personal ambition" at play. "He is a sensible, secular and democratic man," he told me. But, he added, "if you are at the pinnacle of your career, there may be a Faustian bargain to be made." ■

NARINDER NANU / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

FALSE PROPHET

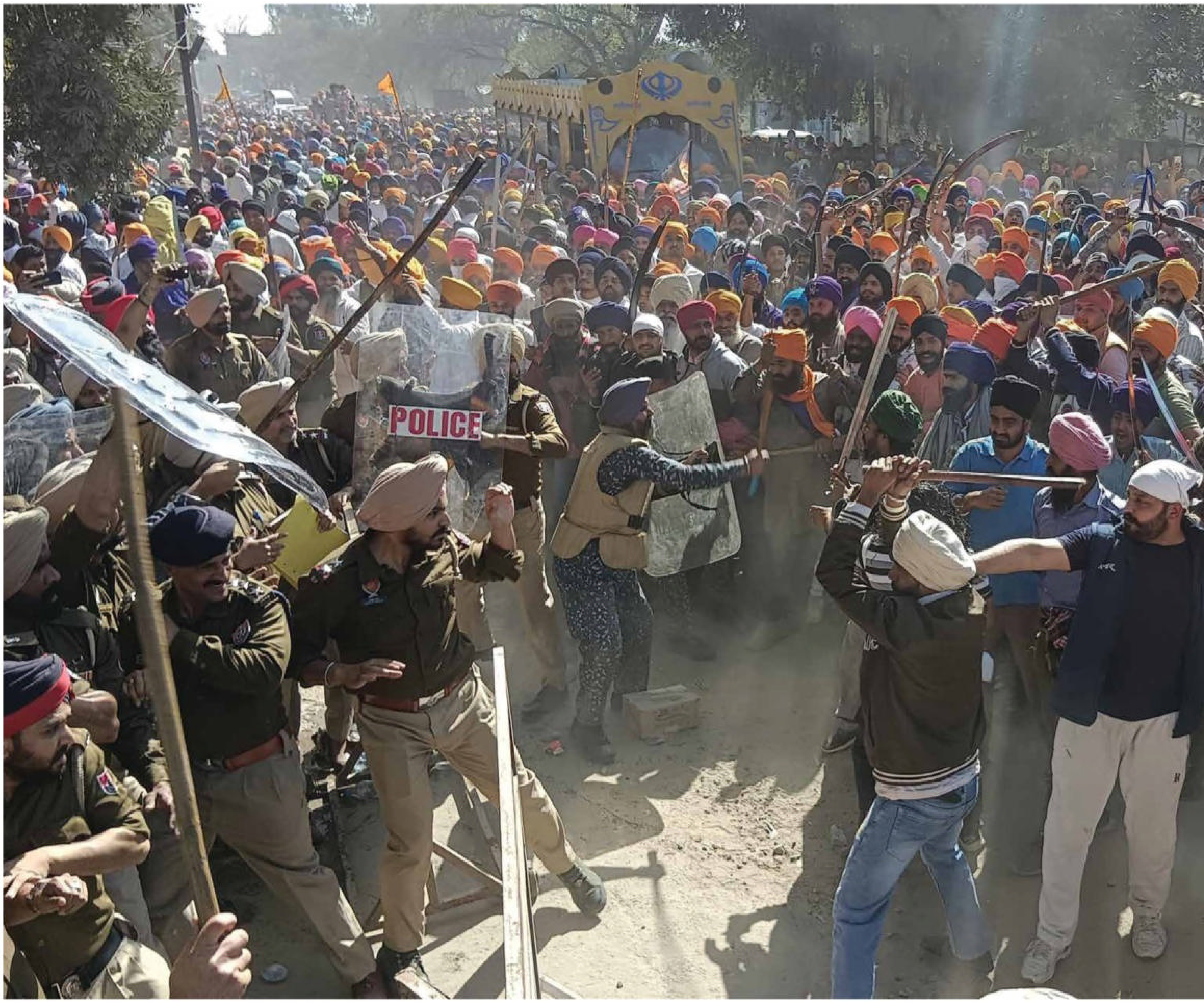
Amritpal's sudden rise follows a script from Punjab's past

REPORTAGE / POLITICS

JATINDER KAUR TUR

IT WAS AROUND 2 PM on the afternoon of 23 February. A contingent of the Punjab Police, almost eight hundred strong and armed with lathis, stood behind barricades placed outside the Ajnala Police Station, near Amritsar. On the other side, a crowd of equal size was gathering. Scores among them were armed with kirpans, flanking a converted bus that held a *palki sahib*—a consecrated seat for the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy book. Walking alongside the vehicle, surrounded by men armed with rifles, was Amritpal Singh, a 30-year-old self-styled preacher. He had been travelling up and down the state for the past six months, calling for the establishment of Khalistan, an independent state for Sikhs, and urging a return to Sikh orthodoxy, which he often redefined on his own terms.

Within minutes, the front line of the crowd, which had several Nihang Sikhs, an armed warrior order, broke down the barricades and pushed towards the police station. Media footage shows the police moving to the sides and giving way to the crowd accompanying the bus without any resistance. Simultaneously, Amritpal and his armed gunmen moved



SAMEER SEHGAL / HINDUSTAN TIMES

behind the bus, using it as a shield as they pushed towards the police station. Soon, the crowd surrounding the bus attacked the police, who, again, did not retaliate. At least six police personnel, including a superintendent, were injured in the melee. Amritpal and his supporters then occupied the station for the next several hours, using a microphone to give speeches from inside and to address the media thronging the site. The bus remained parked outside the station and the police stood on the side lines.

The trigger for the incident was a first-information report filed at the Ajnala Police Station on 16 February that named Amritpal, five of his supporters and around twenty other unnamed persons, in a case of kidnapping and assault. The case was filed by Varinder Singh, a preacher associated with the Damdami Taksal (Ajnala), a Sikh seminary. Varinder supported Amritpal earlier but had recently fallen out with him and his group, Waris Punjab De, a socio-political organisation. Two days later, the police detained Amritpal's associate Lovepreet Singh, known by the alias Toofan, in connection with the FIR, even as the preacher roamed free for days.

Between 22 and 25 February, Amritpal gave several interviews and speeches offering different versions of why he and his supporters descended on the police station. In some, Amritpal claimed he was going to court arrest and that he had told the police that he would lead a peaceful procession for the same. In others, he claimed that Lovepreet was innocent of the charges, that the police tortured him in custody and that Waris Punjab De came to secure their associate's release.

While the incident will be dissected for months to come, its brazenness sent shockwaves through a state that still bears the scars of an insurgency that lasted over a decade and killed and disappeared thousands. It has also

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Amritpal Singh (centre), at the Golden Temple, in Punjab's Amritsar city, on 30 October 2022. Amritpal returned to India in August, after a decade in Dubai. In the short period since his return, he has anointed himself a saviour of the Sikh community and become the most visible proponent of the demand for Khalistan.

LEFT: Supporters of Amritpal Singh clash with Punjab Police, at the Ajnala Police Station, near Amritsar, on 23 February 2023. Amritpal and his supporters had demanded the release of one of his aides, Lovepreet Singh, after he was detained in a case of kidnap and assault.

compounded the disquiet surrounding Amritpal, who was practically unknown in the state until March last year. He returned to India, in August 2022, after spending a decade in Dubai. In the short period since his return, he has anointed himself a saviour of the Sikh community and become the most visible proponent of the demand for Khalistan, with the regional and mainstream media giving him ample coverage. Amritpal is not coy about positioning himself as a successor to Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the fourteenth head of the orthodox Sikh seminary Damdami Taksal. In the early 1980s, Bhindranwale ran a parallel government from within the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar, wreaking havoc on law and order and the state machinery. In 1984, he was killed when Indian armed forces breached the Golden Temple in Operation Bluestar, triggering the insurgency.

The latest incident has also added to the growing list of questions around Amritpal. The police's soft-glove approach to him has puzzled analysts, the Sikh clergy and common people alike. On the evening after the Ajnala incident, Amritpal announced to his supporters and the media that they had come to an agreement with the authorities. No action would be taken against anyone in the crowd, and Lovepreet would be released the next day. Amritpal's strategic use of the Guru Granth Sahib as cover during the attack to ensure the police's meek response—the Punjab Police is already struggling with a controversial case of sacrilege and murderous police action from 2015—suggests that Amritpal is confident that he can take on the law and come out unscathed.

His use of the holy book, which was condemned by many Sikhs, did not elicit a response from the highest echelons of the Sikh religious leadership until two days later, after some voices within the clergy began demanding that Amritpal be denounced. Even then, the clergy leaders took a soft stance. The Akal Takht, the highest temporal seat of Sikhism, announced that it would set up a committee comprised of scholars and representatives of Sikh sects, seminaries and organisations, to look into the placement of the book at "places like sites of protests, demonstration and other disputed places, where apprehension remains of hurting respect and dignity of the Guru Granth Sahib." The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, the apex elected body that oversees Sikh institutions, had been similarly silent—the SGPC had provided logistical support to Amritpal's events in previous months. The hardliner element of the Sikh polity was furious with the use of the holy book for what was essentially a personal agenda and baffled by the disembodied response of the state machinery.

At this point, it is not a stretch to wonder if the union and state governments, as well as the leadership of the Sikh clergy, are repeating the mistakes of forty years ago.

In this charged atmosphere, the silence of the Aam Aadmi Party government in the state and the central Bharatiya Janata Party-led government, which is usually quick to wield its anti-terror tools, is deafening. The chief minister, Bhagwant Mann, who also handles home affairs, took two days to acknowledge the incident, in a tweet that did not name Amritpal. Barring a missive in October, the union home ministry too has been curiously tolerant of Amritpal. *The Caravan* has previously noted how the BJP appears to be reviving the bogey of Khalistan on the backs of figures such as the late actor Deep Sidhu, who founded Waris Punjab De.

At this point, it is not a stretch to wonder if the union and state governments, as well as the leadership of the Sikh clergy, are repeating the mistakes of forty years ago. Bhindranwale assumed the title "*Sant*," or saint, in 1977, when he was appointed the head of the Damdami Taksal, which continues to be one of Sikhism's most prominent seminaries. Soon after, he got involved in a high-profile and murderous religious clash with a heterodox Sikh sect, the Sant Nirankaris, and their chief, Gurbachan Singh. In April 1980, Gurbachan was killed, and Bhindranwale was implicated in the conspiracy. He retreated into the confines of the Golden Temple, trusting that the police would not dare to breach the site. He stayed there till the union home minister, Zail Singh, came to his rescue and absolved him of any role in Gurbachan's murder. The incident suddenly made Bhindranwale the face of Sikh orthodoxy. He had outflanked the Akalis, who held that mantle for half a century, and caught Delhi's attention. The clash with the Nirankaris established a pattern that Bhindranwale repeated over the years: he would instigate an outbreak of violence with his rhetoric, take refuge behind religious symbology and eventually be given a clean chit by the authorities.

Amritpal picks up issues relevant to the people of Punjab, and infuses them with a radical strain of Sikhism and religious identitarian politics. Given the highly controversial nature of his statements, large chunks of which are effectively hate speech, he draws a lot of attention from the mainstream regional media and now, the national media. The volatility afforded by social-media platforms also helps him stay visible. Overt and covert support from certain sections of Punjab's political and religious institutions gives him a veneer of legitimacy.

The real question is how much public support has he actually won. By all indications, politicians across party lines, security forces and even the hardliner factions in Punjab are wary of him, more so after the events of 23 February. His sudden appearance, his deliberate attempts to mimic Bhindranwale's legacy and the violence inherent in his message do not bode well for a state that is experiencing a churn it has not seen in at least two decades. Mainstream political parties, especially the Shiromani Akali Dal and the Congress, are stumbling in a self-made political wilderness. There is an increasing distrust of the corrupted *panthic*—ecclesiastical—politics of the state. Added to this mix is a generation of youth pummelled by widespread unemployment and a drug epidemic, disenchantment with the central establishment in the aftermath of the farmers' protest and a seemingly rudderless religious identity. All of this should rightfully set off alarm bells. Amritpal is no lightning rod for the issues plaguing the state yet, but, as Punjab's history has shown, that could change swiftly. And the incident of 23 February could just turn out to be the nudge that toppled the first domino.

Amritpal picks up issues relevant to the people of Punjab, and infuses them with a radical strain of Sikhism and religious identitarian politics.

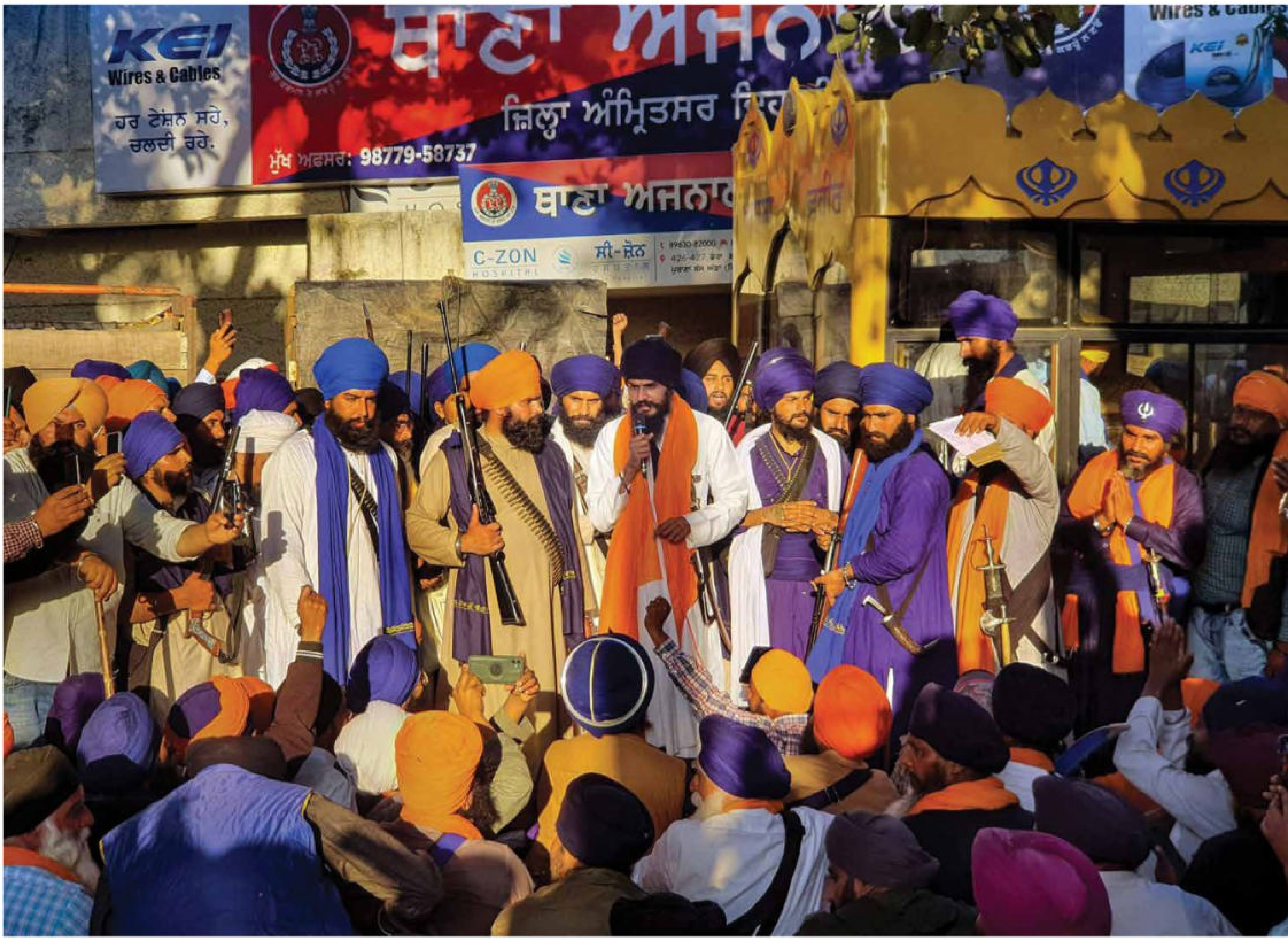
DETAILS OF AMRITPAL'S BACKGROUND are hard to come by. He was born, in 1993, in the village of Jallupur Khera, in Amritsar district's Baba Bakala tehsil. He is the youngest of Tarsem Singh and Balwinder Kaur's three children. According to news reports, he studied up to the tenth standard and then enrolled in a polytechnic institute. While his mother stays in Jallupur Khera, his father divides his time between India and Dubai, where he has a transport business. In 2012, Amritpal moved to Dubai to work with his father. He spent the next decade there, but not much is known about this time.

On 10 February 2023, he married Kirandeep Kaur, in a ceremony at his native village. According to news reports, his wife is a non-resident Indian based in the United Kingdom. Amritpal told the media that "his marriage was an example of reverse migration" and that he and his wife would stay in Punjab. During his speeches over the last six months, he has often urged the youth to refrain from going abroad and to work in Punjab instead.

Amritpal has been active on Facebook since 2012. He would post about issues concerning Punjab on his social-media profiles, but there was not much religious tonality to his interactions. His pictures from then show him clean shaven, with short hair, often dressed in casual t-shirts and denims. He had no significant social-media following until 2020, when he started posting in support of the farmers' agitation. He was a vocal supporter of Deep Sidhu and would often engage with him on social-media platforms, including Facebook Live and Clubhouse events. Reportedly, Amritpal's following on social media increased significantly once he started associating with Sidhu—specifically, after he vociferously defended Sidhu when the latter was arrested for his involvement in the violence that erupted in Delhi during a tractor parade on 26 January 2021.

While Amritpal claims that he built a strong bond with Sidhu during this period, the late actor's family, including his brother Mandeep, have said that the two never met. Mandeep told media organisations that, at one point, Sidhu blocked Amritpal on social media. While speaking to the *Indian Express*, Amritpal countered this charge by claiming that Sidhu would often do this with his close confidants for "security reasons."

Sidhu created Waris Punjab De in September 2021. It was formally registered, three months later, as Warris Panj-aab De. Over the next couple of months, as Punjab went to polls, the organisation campaigned for the hardliner Simranjit Singh Mann and some members of his Shiromani Akali Dal (Amritsar), a separatist party formed as



PTI

a breakaway faction of the SAD. Simranjit is currently the member of parliament from Sangrur.

Sidhu died in a car accident in February 2022, leaving his fledging organisation ostensibly without a leader. In a contentious turn of events, on 4 March, Simranjit announced that Amritpal had been appointed the new head of the organisation. This announcement took several people associated with the organisation by surprise, especially since Amritpal was not even in the country at the time. No one really knew him, barring his social-media presence.

While Sidhu was the founder of the organisation, its official head was an associate of his, Harnek Singh Uppal, also known as Fauji. Fauji and another close relative of Sidhu, who did not want to be identified, confirmed that Sidhu had nominated Fauji as the president. "Deep Sidhu wanted such a name for the organisation which would reflect its motto with its name," Fauji told me. He said that the registration papers were initially rejected due to a spelling issue. "Thus, the name was changed to Panj-aab—the five rivers. The full name of the organisation is Warris Panj-aab De Social and Welfare Society, and it was registered on 15 December 2021." Fauji told me that he was the one who submitted the documents for registration, at Mohali.

Fauji and the close relative said that Simranjit's announcement took them by surprise. "Mann declared that the office bearers elected Amritpal Singh of Dubai as their president," Fauji said. "A few of the members of our organisation were associated with Mann's party, too, but we were neither taken into confidence nor consulted." According to Fauji and the close relative, Simranjit never discussed Amritpal's ascension with Sidhu's family. Fauji also said that Simranjit did not even bother to meet Sidhu's family after his death. In addition, the close relative told me that, despite using Sidhu's organisation to launch himself in Punjab, Amritpal has never once met Sidhu's family or reached out to them.

Fauji told me that, after Amritpal's takeover, they created and registered another organisation with the name Waris Punjab De Social Welfare

ABOVE: Amritpal Singh and his supporters at the Ajnala Police Station, near Amritsar, in Punjab, on 23 February 2023. Amritpal's use of the Guru Granth Sahib, as a shield to avoid police action, was condemned by scholars, the Sikh clergy, the police and politicians across the spectrum.

Society, Talwara, Amloh, Fatehgarh Sahib, in July 2022. Consequently, there are now two organisations with similar sounding names, and Sidhu's family has since conceded that the Waris Punjab De headed by Amritpal is a faction of Sidhu's outfit.

Two days after Simranjit's announcement, Amritpal gave what was probably one of his first media interviews, to a little-known YouTube channel called KTV Global. During the interview, he called India's "colonial rule" over Punjab one of the state's biggest problems and framed Punjab's status as akin to "slavery."

AMRITPAL'S ENTRY INTO the socio-religious arena in Punjab began in earnest when he landed in Amritsar a few months later, on 20 August. His first stop was the Golden Temple. He was accompanied by Gobind Singh, Simranjit's grandson. That day, he was also given the *siropa*—a vestment offered to guests—at the Akal Takht, by Sukhwinder Singh, one of the Panj Pyare, the "beloved five" who are ordained to represent Sikhs. This raised eyebrows, as the siropa is usually reserved for honoured guests or those who have contributed in some form to the Sikh community, leading many to question why Amritpal was being propped up so forcefully.

Amritpal spent the next month reaching out to the following that Sidhu had built, and meeting political and religious leaders. A significant number of the young people who follow Amritpal today are those who actively participated in the farmers' agitation. Once the protests wrapped up in December 2021, and after Sidhu's demise, neither the leadership of the protests nor mainstream politicians had cared to tap into the concerns of this segment of Punjab's youth. Amritpal swooped in to fill the vacuum.

He also used this period to drastically alter his appearance to that of a devout Sikh. From the very beginning, he made it clear that he was positioning himself at the radical end of the spectrum and espousing an orthodox Sikhism. On 3 September, in one of his first major public appearances, he participated in a programme at the Chamkaur Sahib gurdwara, in Rupnagar district, to pay tributes to the Khalistani militants Balwinder Singh Jatana and Charanjit Singh Channa. His appearance at this event was more strategic than evident at first glance.

In 1990, Jatana killed two engineers working on the Satluj–Yamuna Link canal—a controversial project which was a proposed resolution to an acrimonious water-sharing conflict between Punjab and Haryana that had arisen after the states were split. In May 2022, the Punjabi rapper and popular youth icon Shubhdeep Singh Sidhu—known as Sidhu Moose Wala—was shot dead. Three weeks later, his estate released a previously recorded song titled "SYL," in which Sidhu uses Jatana to threaten "Delhi" and demands that Punjab be reunited with Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. Sidhu's popularity is such that the song garnered millions of views in just a few hours after its release, before the central government asked YouTube to take it down.

In September, Amritpal launched *amrit prachar* campaigns at several locations across the state. Accepting *amrit*—holy water—is the process of getting baptised into the Sikh religion and involves following a certain code of conduct and lifestyle. Bhindranwale, too, used to conduct amrit prachars. Amritpal himself was baptised, along with several hundred people, on 25 September, at the Takht Kesgarh Sahib in the Anandpur Sahib gurdwara. Amritpal belongs to the Sandhu clan, who are a part of the dominant, land-owning Jutt Sikh caste in Punjab. When

BELOW: Amritpal Singh at an event in Rode village, in Punjab's Moga district, on 29 September 2022. The event was a *dastarbandi*, a turban-tying ceremony that anoints the head of a family or clan. The event announced his official takeover of the breakaway faction of the Waris Panjab De. Rode is also Bhindranwale's ancestral village.

EXPRESS ARCHIVE

I reached out to Amritpal, his uncle Harjit Singh told me not to use the surname "Sandhu" for him or Amritpal. Sikhism is egalitarian in nature and does not recognise caste. Strictly speaking, baptised Sikhs are not supposed to carry any markers of caste. Several of his supporters now refer to him as Amritpal Singh Khalsa. Beyond this directive, Amritpal and Harjit did not respond to my queries.

The SGPC endorsed Amritpal's call at Anandpur Sahib and provided logistical support. On social media, this particular event was cast as *ghar wapasi*—homecoming—a term popularised by the Hindu Right as a return of historical Muslim converts into the Hindu fold. The SGPC has also provided logistical support to Amritpal's other amrit prachar campaigns.

For those who remember Bhindranwale's era, Amritpal's espousal of Khalistan, while angling to take over his legacy, is particularly disconcerting. Bhindranwale paid little heed to the demand for a separate state in his lifetime—it was after his death in 1984, that Khalistan became a holy grail for militants.

It was an event on 29 September, however, that was a true announcement of Amritpal's positioning. That day, Amritpal participated in a *dastarbandi*—a turban-tying ceremony that anoints the head of a family or clan—to announce his official takeover of the breakaway faction of Waris Panjab De. The event was conducted at quite a large scale at Rode village, in Moga district. The significance of the location was not lost on anyone. Rode is the ancestral home of Bhindranwale.

The event was attended by thousands. Amritpal went on stage amid chants of "Khalistan Zindabad!" He called Bhindranwale "an inspiration" and called for the establishment of Khalistan. Amritpal said that Sikhs "have become a community of slaves," and that the crowd must remember that Rode was the place where the struggle for the "*panth's azaadi*"—the community's freedom—was launched. A resolution passed at the event asked the central and state governments to avoid detaining or charging the youth pressing "for a peaceful struggle for Khalistan" in India and abroad.

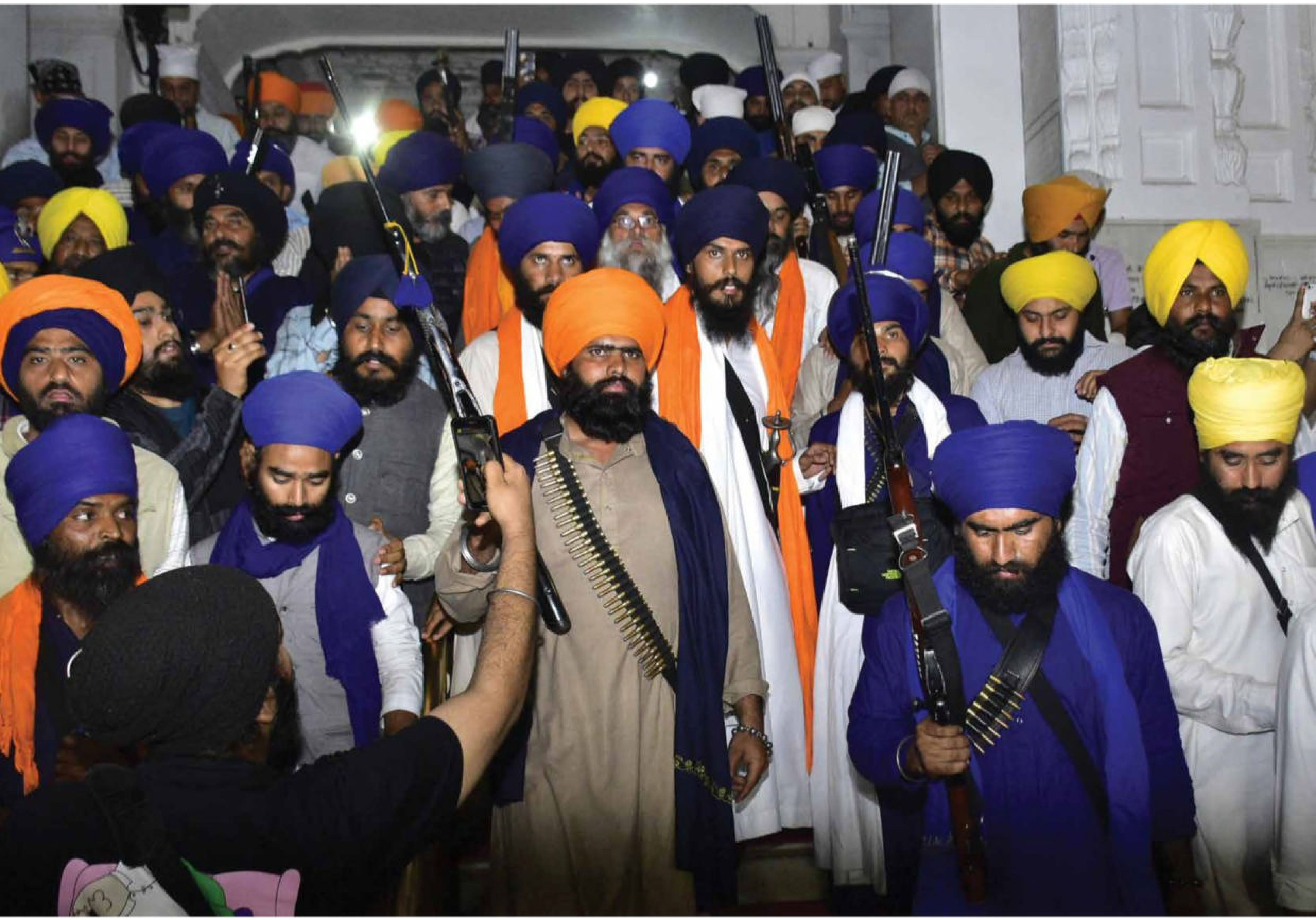
For those who remember Bhindranwale's era, Amritpal's espousal of Khalistan, while angling to take over his legacy, is particularly disconcerting. Bhindranwale paid little heed to the demand for a separate state in his lifetime—it was after his death in 1984, that Khalistan became a holy grail for militants. Even at the peak of the insurgency, the demand for a separate Sikh state was a "chimera," GBS Sidhu, a former special secretary of the Research & Analysis Wing, notes in his book *The Khalistan Conspiracy*. The Congress government of the time tried to counter "non-existent Khalistan activities," Sidhu writes. "Delhi was unnecessarily making a mountain of a molehill where none existed."

While noting how the current dispensation was attempting something similar, *The Caravan* had reported on the central government's outsized reaction to Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, the founder and legal advisor of Sikhs for Justice, a US-based Khalistani secessionist group. Pannun announced worldwide referenda on the secession of Punjab from India and the creation of Khalistan, in 2018. Pannun, the organisation and the referenda hold no sway in Punjab or even among the Khalistani hardliners, in India and abroad. This did not deter the Indian government from aggressively pursuing him and designating him a terrorist under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.

Pannun was being targeted so that the BJP could sustain the spectre of Khalistan. This would have the effect of scaring Hindus in Punjab and create a communal rift between the communities—finally drumming up support for their grand vision of a Hindu Rashtra. Ranjit Singh Gill Kukki spent eighteen years in jail for allegedly killing Lalit Maken, a Congress leader reportedly involved in the 1984 anti-Sikh pogroms. He told me that "all this is a deep-rooted play by Indian agencies to create unrest in Punjab. Similar crowds are working in Canada, England, Australia. They blacken temple walls or run after installing Guru Sahib's Nishan Sahib flag in front of the embassies." He added, "I don't need to name them, but lighting up of Ayodhya with 15 lakh diyas, Islamophobia, Christian-phobia, politicians are using religion and copycat cult figures to browbeat real issues."

During the Rode event, in an echo of Bhindranwale's rhetoric, Amritpal also targeted Hindu migrants from states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, blaming them for selling drugs and cigarettes—proscribed in Sikhism—and fuelling addiction in the state. "If you do not want such things to happen in your village," he urged the audience, "take action." In later speeches, Amritpal asked Sikhs not to sell land to "outsiders." Following the Rode event, the state finance minister, Harpal Cheema, told reporters that an inquiry would be ordered against Amritpal for his incendiary speech. It is unknown if an inquiry was ever instituted, and questions to Bhagwant Mann went unanswered.

FOR THE NEXT FOUR WEEKS, Amritpal zipped across several locations in the state, giving speeches at public and private events, utilising the legitimacy and following of Waris Punjab De. He increasingly surrounded himself with trappings mirroring Bhindranwale—travelling with an entourage of over a dozen men donned in traditional Sikh attire, armed with guns and kirpans and steel arrows. His speeches started becoming increasingly communal and divisive, generously peppered with calls for Khalistan, with underlying threats of violence. Consequently, on 7 October, his Twitter account was withheld. One of his Instagram accounts was blocked, in December, while another account was blocked soon after the events at the Ajnala police station.



ABOVE: Amritpal Singh at the Golden Temple, in Punjab's Amritsar city, on 24 February 2023. Since his arrival in the country six months ago, Amritpal made it clear that he was positioning himself at the radical end of the spectrum and espousing an orthodox Sikhism. He mimics Bhindranwale at every step

SAMEER SEHGAL / HINDUSTAN TIMES

On 14 October, there was an event at Faridkot district to mark the seventh anniversary of what are referred to as the Behbal Kalan killings—in 2015, two people were killed by the police during a protest against an alleged incident of sacrilege. Taking the stage at the event, Amritpal said, "We should declare our Sikh *hukumat*"—rule. "We suffered a hundred and fifty years of slavery, first by the British and then by the Hindus. We have developed slave mentality."

Around the same time, Amritpal started targeting the state's Christian community. In a couple of his videos that surfaced on social media, he could be seen asking village residents to start restricting access to Christian pastors by putting up signboards at the entry of the village. In another video, which caused a major furore in the Christian community, he asks, "How will Jesus, who could not save himself, save everyone else?" His statements sparked a massive protest, on 17 October in Jalandhar, by Punjabi Christians demanding action against him. The protest was called off after authorities assured the community that they would investigate the matter. However, no action was taken against Amritpal.

Kamal Masih Khokhar, a lawyer and a social activist, pointed out that the police's inaction was baffling. "Why are they not booking Amritpal for hurting the religious sentiments of Christian community?" Khokhar said that it was surprising that there was no case against Amritpal although he could have been booked under many relevant sections of the Indian Penal Code. Khokhar warned that, if Amritpal was not reined in, Punjab would witness violence against Christians, many of whom are poor and belong to Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe communities.

At every event, amid bombastic calls for Khalistan, Amritpal has mixed his oratory with references to social issues that affect the people, particularly the youth: the drug menace, access to water, land disputes, alcohol addiction, domestic violence and Sikh political prisoners, among others. However, he usually links each of the state's problems to vectors or influences from outside the state. For instance, when talking about land disputes and the resource crunch, he blamed the "*Dilli ki hukumat*"—Delhi's leadership—for sending "*bhaiyas* from Bihar, UP, Uttarakhand, and Himachal to outnumber Sikhs in Punjab." He turned his guns on Hindi, telling his followers that "they should stop buying from shops with signboards written in Hindi."

Sunil Jakhar, a former Congress leader who recently joined the BJP, said that "there is pervading lawlessness in the state since AAP came to power." He cited "high-profile murders, the Punjab Police intelligence headquarters coming under attack and gangsters targeting businessmen. In this background, fringe elements have got a whiff of fresh air to try their hand at catching the imagination of citizens, especially the youngsters, whom they find easy to mislead with distorted essence of history."

Fauji and Deep Sidhu's close relative were deeply upset that Waris Punjab De was being used as a platform of hate and religious divisiveness. "Sidhu never believed in the religious divide," Fauji said. The close relative accused Amritpal and Simranjit of "hijacking and exploiting Sidhu's popularity and giving him a bad name with their hate speeches." Sidhu's family has now publicly distanced itself from Amritpal.

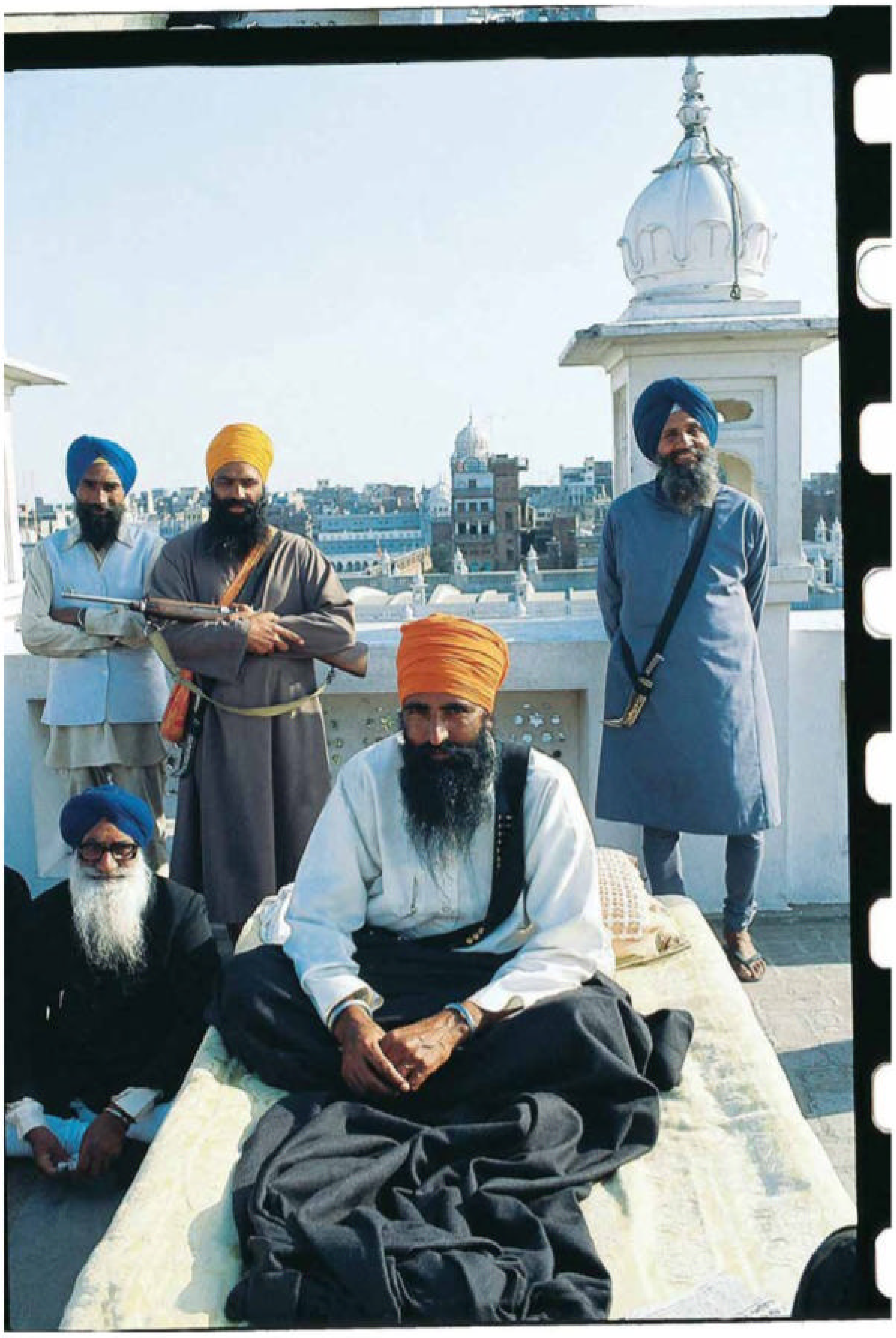
On 4 November, Sudhi Suri, a leader of the Shiv Sena (Taksali), a Hindu right-wing outfit in Amritsar, was shot to death in broad daylight while protesting the management of a temple on Majitha Road, where the idols of some Hindu deities had reportedly been desecrated. Suri had often clashed with locals over communal issues. According to the *Economic Times*, "Suri had been raising his voice against Sikh 'fundamentalists' and triggered controversies in the past." The murder, which happened in the presence of local police officials, was also caught on camera. The assailant was identified as Sandeep Singh, whose social-media feeds were filled with pro-Khalistan content. Hours later, a video surfaced showing Sandeep meeting Amritpal and taking his blessings just days before the shooting. The local media projected the murder as a "Hindu leader" killed by a "Sikh gunman."

A day after Suri's murder, Amritpal was placed under house arrest in Singhawala village, in Moga district. Gulneet Singh Khurana, a senior superintendent of police, told me that Amritpal was planning to address a gathering in Jalandhar and, "considering Suri's murder happened just a day before and this could result in a law-and-order situation, he was asked not to go out of the village that day." Another senior police official, who did not want to be named, told me that Amritpal and his associates had called for his supporters to reach Singhawala, inciting them in the name of Amritpal's detention. "Few reached and the situation stayed under control," the official told me. "This also shows how much actual following he has got."

Amritpal appears to be sensitive about this question of his following among the people. After the ruckus at the Ajnala police station, Amritpal emphasised to the media that the crowd had gathered in his support. He claimed that most members of the crowd had joined his procession to the police station on their own.

Sandeep's advocate, Navkiran Singh, is a prominent lawyer with radical leanings who has worked on drugs and human-rights issues in Punjab. He favoured Amritpal in an email conversation with me. "People feel that there was instigation and Amritpal was the reason behind the same," he wrote. "Sandeep Singh embraced Amrit six years back and it was around that time that he bought

BELOW: Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale was the fourteenth head of the orthodox Sikh seminary Damdami Taksal. In the early 1980s, Bhindranwale ran a parallel government from within the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar, wreaking havoc on law and order and the state machinery.



RAGHU RAI / THE INDIA TODAY GROUP / GETTY IMAGES

ਯਿਸੂ ਹੀ ਪ੍ਰਭੂ ਹੈ
ਮਸੀਹ ਏਕਤਾ ਜ਼ਿੰਦਾਬਾਦ
ਈਸਾਈਆਂ ਉੱਤੇ ਅੱਤਿਆਚਾਰ ਬੰਦ ਕਰੋ
ਈਸਾਈਆਂ ਉੱਤੇ ਝੂਠੇ ਪਰਚੇ ਕਰਨੇ ਬੰਦ ਕਰੋ

ANI PHOTO

the revolver with which he allegedly shot Sudhir Suri. And I don't feel that there was any immediate incitement."

Navkiran then launched into a long explanation for why he thought Amritpal had risen to such prominence. "We have to understand the failure of Sikh leaders and the background of Punjab's political scene wrt Panthic Politics. Role of traditional Akalis like Badals etc in Akali politics and running of the SGPC or using the Akal Takht Jathedar"—chief—"under SGPC has led Sikhs in general to feel that Akalis could not safeguard the rights of Sikhs wrt to the Sikh affairs and issues." Navkiran echoed a common analysis of Punjab's political milieu, that there is a "big vacuum in politics especially the Sikh politics."

According to Navkiran, "a large segment of Sikhs feel that they are being bullied and there is an interference in their religion and undermining Guru Sahiban … People feel that those responsible for all this are not being adequately punished by the governments and it's because of this that people are turning towards violence." When I pushed him on Amritpal's divisive statements, Navkiran replied, "I feel his role should be to steer the youth away from drugs and other bad activities but some of his statements are controversial and are making him a centre of discussions."

Another measure of Amritpal's contentious popularity came soon after Suri's killing. On 23 November, Amritpal launched the first phase of what he called the Khalsa Vaheer from the Akal Takht. The campaign was a mix of amrit prachar events and anti-drugs drives. The first phase ended at Anandpur Sahib, on 21 December, and was spread across over a dozen locations. Several videos of the campaign show Amritpal surrounded by heavily armed guards, raising pro-Khalistan slogans and urging Sikh youth to arm themselves. Amritpal's campaign against drugs is also a significant factor in his popularity with the youth. The Congress and the SAD have both been implicated at various points in the state's drug epidemic; the ruling AAP has fared no better in managing the issue, deepening a void that someone like Amritpal could capitalise on.

Even before the Ajnala clash, three incidents during the Khalsa Vaheer campaign seemed to have taken the sheen off the appeal of Amritpal's religious fervour. On two separate occasions, his followers vandalised gurdwaras. On 9 December, his fol-

The Congress and the SAD have both been implicated at various points in the state's drug epidemic; the ruling AAP has fared no better in managing the issue, deepening a void that someone like Amritpal could capitalise on.

lowers removed the seating arrangements from a gurdwara in Biharipur, a village in Kapurthala district, and set them on fire. Four days later, they repeated the same at the Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha, in Jalandhar. In both cases, Amritpal's followers claimed that the seating arrangements in the gurdwaras violated the *rehat maryada*—the Sikh code of conduct. According to Amritpal and his supporters, no one could sit at the same level as the Guru Granth Sahib, and the placement of chairs at the same height was insulting to the sacred text.

On 18 December, Amritpal's followers brought down a memorial structure honouring a local family's ancestors at a gurdwara in Garcha village, in Shahid Bhagat Singh Nagar district. According to news reports, Amritpal said that "there was no place for any individual setting up a structure in the gurdwara."

All three incidents prompted a local outcry, with the residents terming Amritpal and his supporters as goons. Several residents of both villages pointed out that the chairs had been placed to cater to the regular visitors to the gurdwaras, most of whom are quite elderly and suffered from knee issues or arthritis. Local preachers also took umbrage at the vandalism of their holy sites. Sikh scholars and preachers questioned Amritpal's authority on religious matters. The website *Sikh News* quoted a preacher saying that Sandhu "has no deep knowledge or education on Sikh affairs and is purely a product of social media."

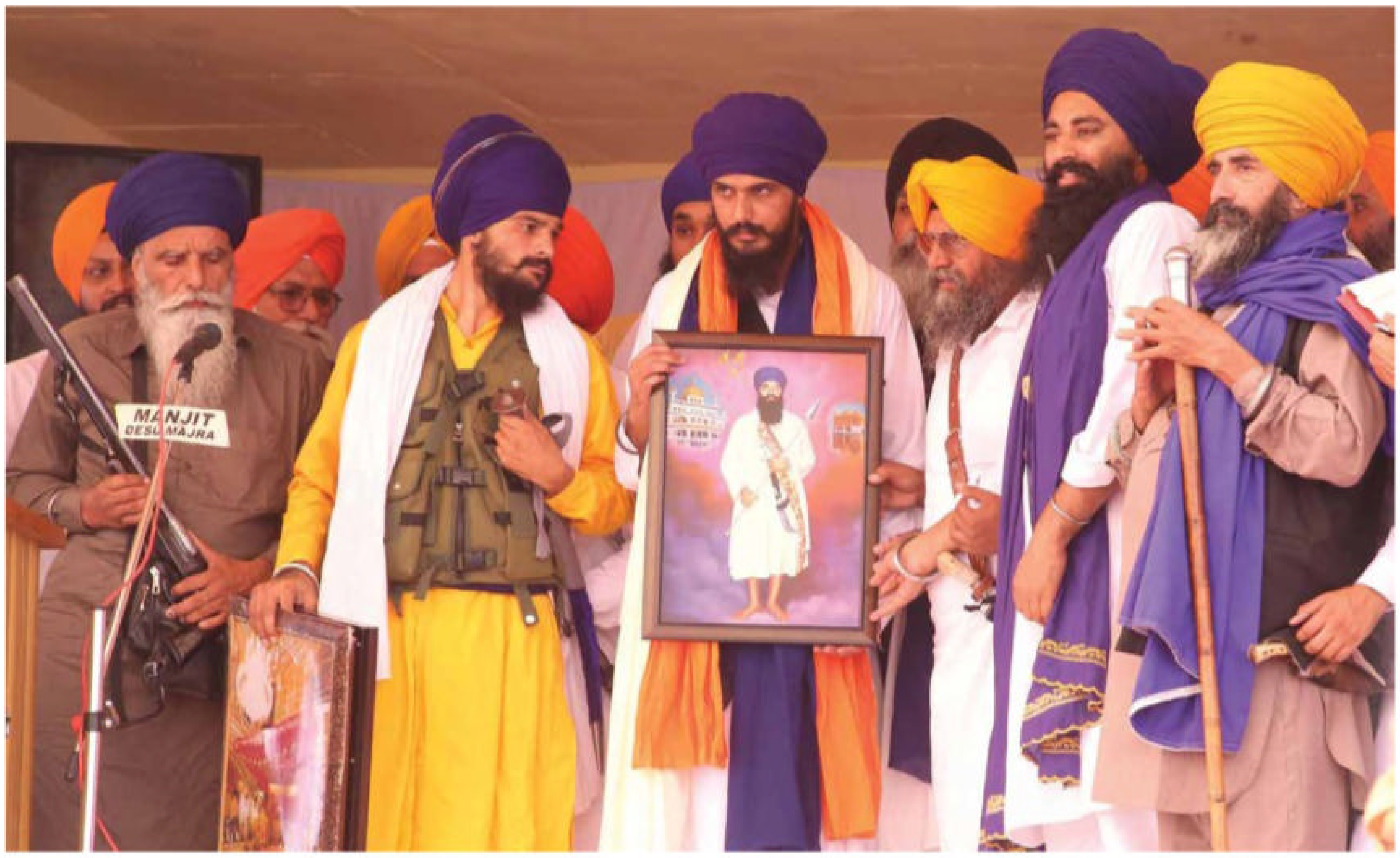
AFTER THE AJNALA INCIDENT, the murmurs of discontent with Amritpal's religious posturing finally found an outlet. Sukhjit Singh Khose, the president of the Shri Guru Granth Sahib Satkar Committee, in Jalandhar, told me, "It's absolutely wrong—making a personal fight a war of the entire community." He questioned Amritpal's understanding of the sanctity and meaning of the Guru Granth Sahib. "We can commence work after taking blessings from the Guru Granth Sahib but cannot use it as a shield for serving individual interests."

In fact, various factions across Punjab, usually pitted against each other, have unequivocally condemned Amritpal's stunt. "The Sikh community was turned into a joke for a personal motive," Kukki told me. "And more important is how the state crumbled before them." Mirroring his views was Harpal Singh Randhawa, the superintendent of police for Pathankot, who is a baptised Sikh and was present on the spot. "Where is it written in the *bani*"—sections of the holy text—"to take Maharaj Da Swaroop"—a term used by devout Sikhs for the Guru Granth Sahib—"to a police station?" he told me. "Those assaulting the unarmed with kirpans, I don't even consider them Sikhs. We had cannon shields and, had we resorted to any kind of police action, that would have led to sacrilege."

Sarchand Singh Khyala, a member of the state BJP, used to be a spokesperson of the Damdami Taksal and media advisor to the SAD leader Bikram Singh Majithia. He, too, echoed Kukki and Khose. Khyala voiced another concern. "The Ajnala incident has echoes of the dark days of Punjab, with the Punjab government and Akal Takht Jathedar bowing before a particular individual's public protest," he said. "If action is not taken, then that incident will repeat."

OPPOSITE PAGE: Members of Punjab's Christian community protest Amritpal Singh's hate speech against the community, at the PAP Chowk, in Jalandhar, on 17 October 2022. Police officials diffused the protest after four hours by assuring the protestors that they would investigate Amritpal. But no action was taken against him.

BELOW: Amritpal holds a portrait of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, during an amrit sanchar, or baptism, at the village of Desu Majra, near Mohali, in Punjab, on 3 November 2022. Bhindranwale's killing by the Indian Army in 1984, triggered a decade-long insurgency in the state. Bhindranwale also used to conduct amrit sanchars, and Amritpal is not coy about positioning himself as a successor to Bhindranwale.



SANJEEV SHARMA / HINDUSTAN TIMES

SAMEER SEHGAL / HINDUSTAN TIMES

ABOVE: **Amritpal Singh, with his supporters, at the Ajnala Police Station, near Amritsar, in Punjab, on 23 February 2023. Amritpal and his supporters clashed with the police, occupied the station for several hours, and he gave speeches from inside the station, while the police stood on the side lines. The police's soft-glove approach to him has puzzled analysts, the Sikh clergy and common people alike.**

Mainstream politicians too expressed concerns about Amritpal, but only to point fingers at each other. In October, Amarinder Singh—the former chief minister of Punjab who recently quit the Congress and joined the BJP—asked the ruling AAP government to take a clear stand against the rising pro-Khalistan conversations in the state. "Who are the forces behind this youth who recently moved to Punjab from Dubai?" Amarinder said. He warned the state government that Punjab cannot be allowed to suffer another insurgency.

Another question being asked is why the security forces seem hesitant to act against Amritpal, as pointed out by Khokhar, the lawyer. Sukhjinder Randhawa, who served as deputy chief minister in the last Congress government, said that "while Amritpal is openly talking about Khalistan and giving speeches seeking independence and against various religions, it is the AAP government at the state level and the BJP government at the centre level that need to clarify as to why are they not taking any action against him."

Despite the incendiary nature of Amritpal's speeches and the hooliganism by his supporters, he has managed to avoid being entangled with the law so far, much to the discomfort of the Punjab Police. There are at least four FIRs against Amritpal's close associates, including some related to possession and licencing of arms. At least three senior police officials, none of whom were willing to be identified, expressed resentment as to why the state police was not curbing Amritpal's actions well in time. "Why let his followers swell amidst the propaganda that is refreshing the memories of Bhindranwale in youth?" one of them said. Another senior officer, from a border district, told me that "tactical engagement" was the "word in fashion in the police department." When I pressed further, he said it meant that they were instructed not to actively engage the protesters. "This Ajnala incident is a new low and, of course, a wrong precedent which has demoralised our force like never before," he said. "How are we going to work? We too have baptised Sikhs in our force. But taking shield of Guru Granth Sahib is unheard of."

Mohnish Chawla, the inspector general of police for the border range of Amritsar, told me that Amritpal and his people "wanted such a nuisance to be created and then we would have been blamed for the sacrilege." Amritpal had claimed that he would court arrest, Chawla added. "He declared it publicly, and the police also spoke to him, wherein he assured that he will come for a peaceful dialogue—he would stop wherever the police asked him to. By bringing along the Guru Granth Sahib, they had planned everything to commit violence."

Addressing the media, a day after the Ajnala clash, the state's director general of police, Gaurav Yadav, gave a similar statement. "The demonstration was permitted," he said, but, "under the cover of Palki Sahib of Sri Guru Granth Sahibji, police were attacked in a cowardly manner." Had the police opened fire, he added, "it would have led to more issues. We have acted with restraint on account of presence of the holy Guru Granth Sahib.” A month before the Ajnala clash, Yadav had raised a red flag about Amritpal’s rise at a national meet of police chiefs, attended by the union home minister, Amit Shah, and the prime minister, Narendra Modi.

Two days after Yadav’s statement, Bhagwant Mann addressed a press conference in Gujarat, in which he downplayed the Ajnala clash as “not as big an issue as it was made out to be” and claimed that “these are just a few people who are funded from abroad … Pakistan.”

Everyone I spoke to asked why the jathedar of the Akal Takht had not spoken out against Amritpal’s use of the Guru Granth Sahib, which the police official from the border district described as “sacrilege.” The announcement of the investigative committee was not received well by many in Punjab, owing to its vagueness and wide scope. It was also seen as an attempt to legitimise Amritpal’s actions by framing them as a “protest.”

The one section of the political players that Amritpal enjoys support from is Simranjit’s SAD(A). Simranjit seems to be the only hardliner who has offered vocal and tangible support to Amritpal. When I spoke to him, instead of addressing my questions on Amritpal, he deflected by asking me to write about the BJP instead. “You should be worried about the march of Hindutva,” he said. “In 2002, Muslims suffered so much damage”—referring to the pogroms in Gujarat. “Thirty-five Sikhs were killed in Chittisinghpura by Indian Army. Why don’t you write about BJP and Kashmir? Why don’t you write about Modi?”

Amritpal is being spoken about in right-wing circles, especially by those involved in Punjab’s religio-political arena. Many such people I spoke to said they were mystified by the state and central government’s refusal to see the writing on the wall. Most of them were quite disdainful of Amritpal’s religious credentials. Another interesting aspect of my conversations with religious and political hardliners was that barring Simranjit, Amritpal seems to have made no effort to reach out or fraternise or create alliances with the old guard.

Amrik Singh Ajnala heads a breakaway faction of the Damdami Taksal. Varinder, the complainant of the FIR that triggered the Ajnala clash, was associated with his organisation. When I first spoke to Ajnala, late last year, he told me that he did not know Amritpal and had never met him. He was especially dismissive of Amritpal’s communal vitriol. “No religion is bad,” he said. “It’s men from a particular religion who can be bad or good. I have neither stirred any controversial issues nor agree with doing so.” He added that even those who talk against Sikhism can be counselled or dealt with legally.

Several former Khalistan supporters, such as Daljeet Singh Bittu, a former militant, refused to comment on Amritpal. Harpal Singh Cheema heads a radical outfit, the Dal Khalsa, about which Amritpal has made some scathing comments. “It’s very easy to stand and say big things,” Cheema told me. “Sacrifices have to be made, and courage is tested after getting implicated in cases and embroiled with the state.” When I first spoke to Cheema, late last year, he told me no one wants to take Punjab back to the days of militancy and that mere statements from an upstart like Amritpal cannot take the state back to that kind of turmoil.

Cheema saw a hidden hand behind Amritpal. “It’s a master plan, and he is being projected as a return of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, replicating all the major events of his life, including the Golden Temple parikrama, dastarbandi, using a cot, interacting with the kids, mannerisms and photographs which are so imprinted on the minds of youth and people.” Kukki, too, was suspicious of Amritpal’s sudden rise. “The universal theme for all that is happening is the 2024 elections,” he told me. “Both Kejriwal”—the AAP supremo and Delhi’s chief minister Arvind Kejriwal—“and Modi have a similar approach of using religious fervour and religiosity to cover up glaring issues surrounding the welfare of Indians.” Another radical Sikh leader, who is based in Amritsar and did not want to be identified, echoed Cheema. “Real is real and fake is fake, and one day he will be unmasked, and the people will come to know,” he said. “The only difference is that the weapons being carried by those surrounding him are licensed and made in India.”

Following the Ajnala incident, Cheema was less dismissive of Amritpal and more concerned with who was supporting him. “The police do not have the political go-ahead and the politicians lack will,” he told me. “Their silence has allowed him to grow.”

Some of Amritpal’s supporters, on the other hand, twist this lack of political will to justify his actions. Gurmeet Bukkanwala, who calls himself Amritpal’s *sewadar*—religious volunteer—told me that the Akal Takht and the SGPC “harm the Sikh community by being political puppets,” thus creating the space for someone like Amritpal, whose “views on sovereignty are there in the open.” Bukkanwala added, “All the senior officers and politicians are involved in the drug trade in Punjab, and that’s why they have an issue with Amritpal.” When I asked him about Amritpal’s dangerous rhetoric and challenge to the authorities, he said, “Army and police armed with weapons, and politicians with fifty gunmen, these are what maintain peace. Because peace comes out of a gun’s bullet.”

“The police do not have the political go-ahead and the politicians lack will. Their silence has allowed him to grow,” said Harpal Singh Cheema.

Kukki put things in perspective. He said the Ajnala incident “shows that these self-declared custodians of Sikh community are just loudmouth sensations trying to instigate people.” He believed that Amritpal and his cohort were taking advantage of the “chaotic state of Punjab’s culture.” He added that the way the state crumbled before Amritpal on 23 February “helps the central government create a narrative to prey upon Punjab and destroy it.” ■

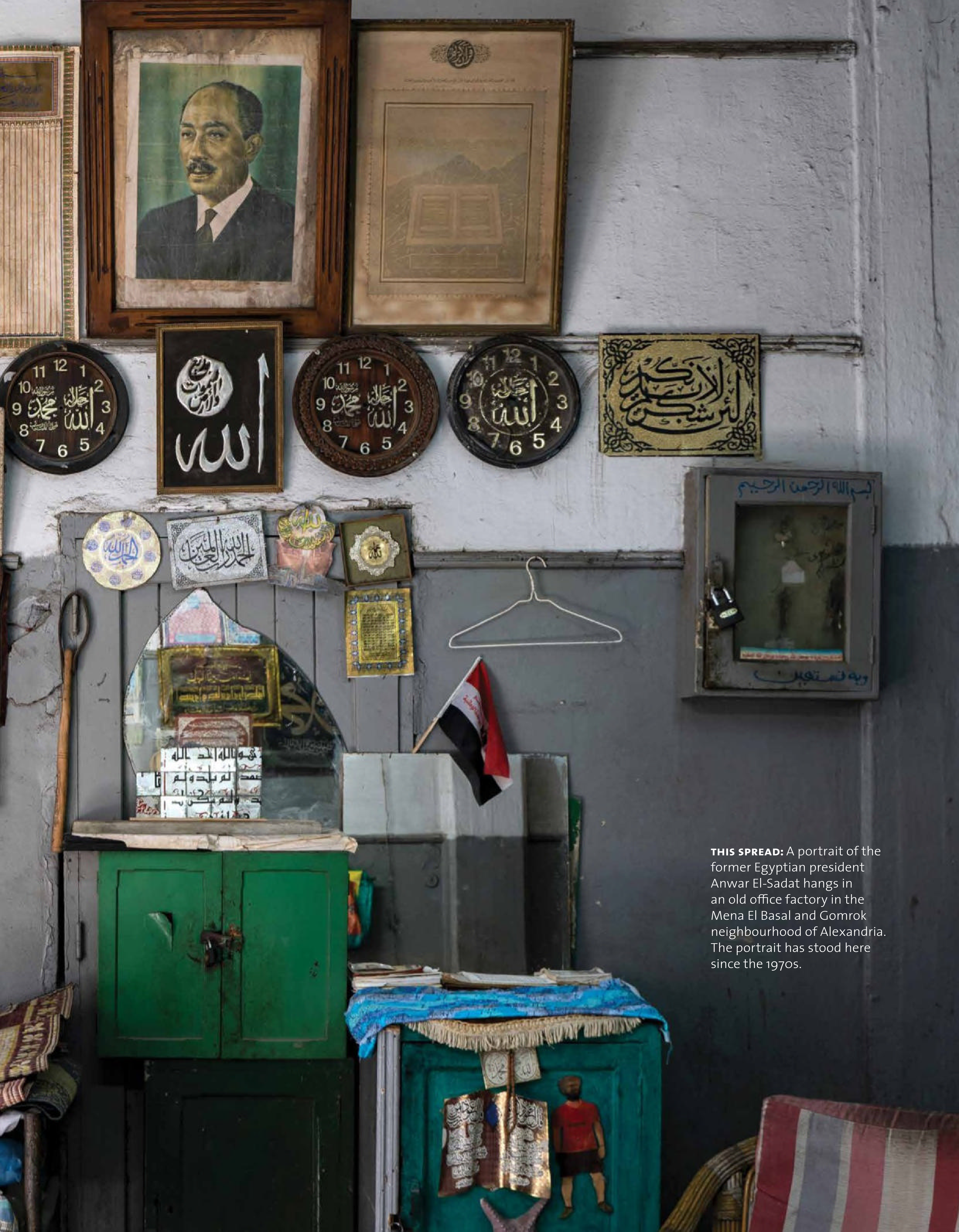
PHOTO ESSAY / HISTORY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **AMINA KADOUS**

TEXT BY **SUKRUTI ANAH STANELEY**

Ways of Remembering

Through framed images of its public icons,
Cairo searches for a lost past



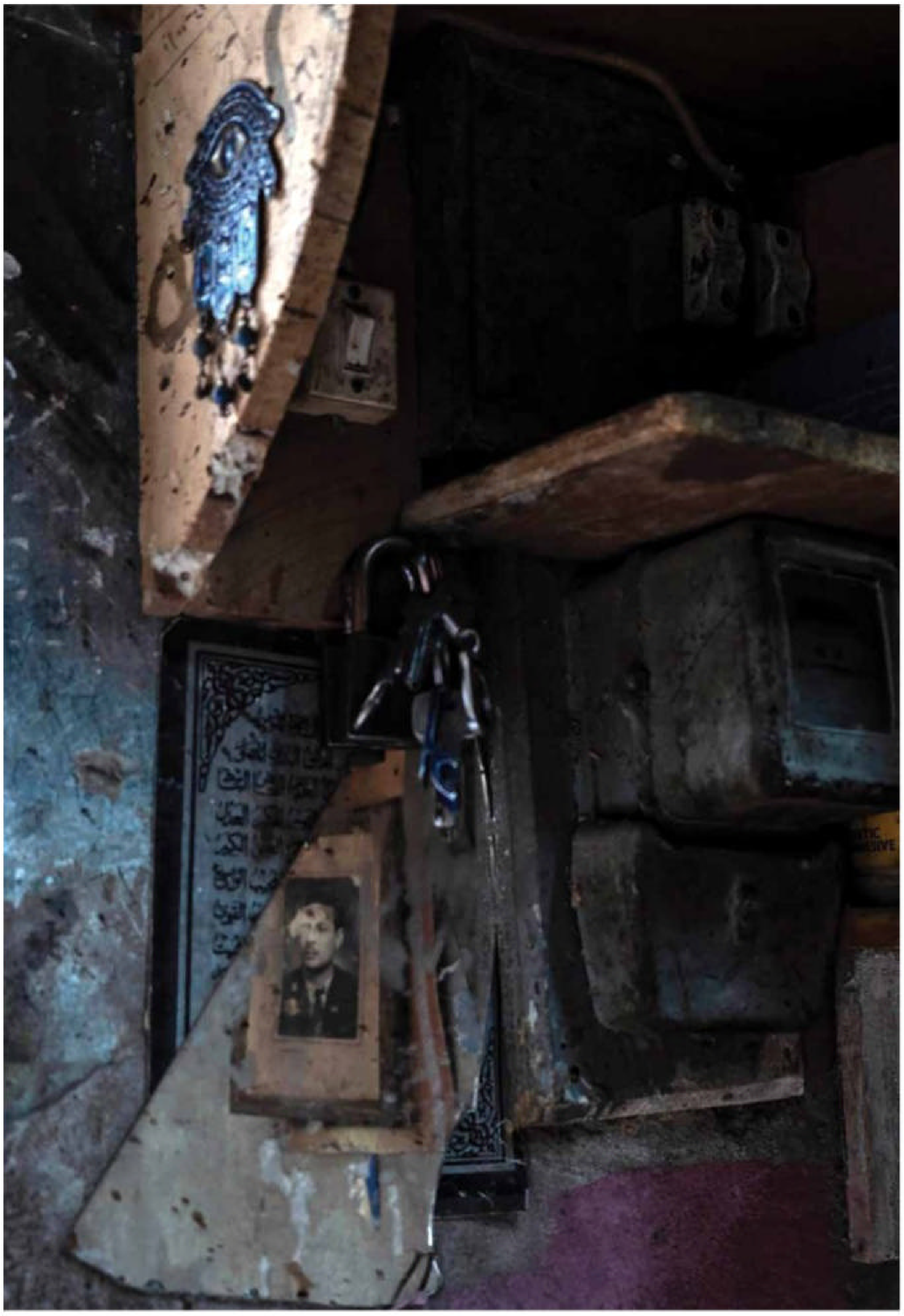
THIS SPREAD: A portrait of the former Egyptian president Anwar El-Sadat hangs in an old office factory in the Mena El Basal and Gomrok neighbourhood of Alexandria. The portrait has stood here since the 1970s.

IN THE ALLEYWAYS OF OLD CAIRO, in its cafes, warehouses and barbershops, framed portraits of Egyptian icons are ubiquitous. Kings, presidents, religious and political figures are all immortalised on fading walls, held up as symbols of a glorious past. The figures may have faced defeat, death, resignation or the collapse of their empires, but what they represent in the public imagination seems to firmly hold on, kept alive in pictures hung across the city.

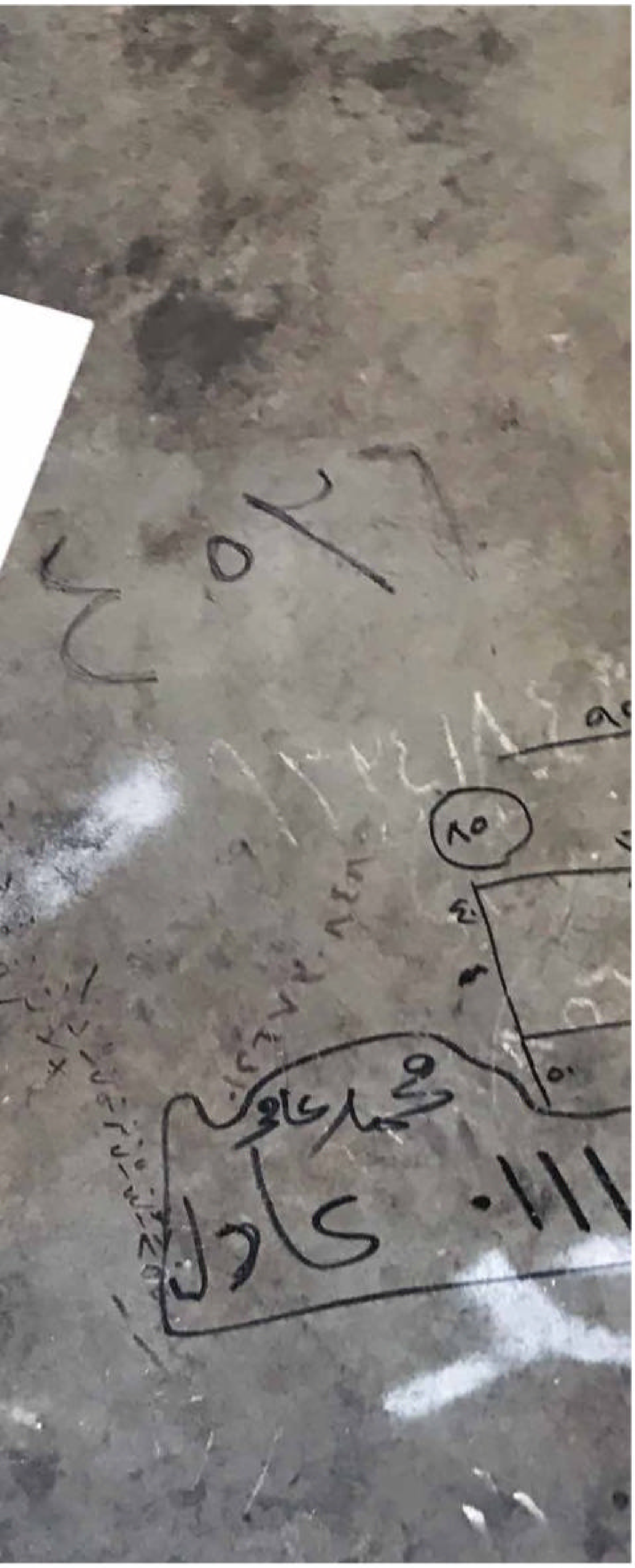
In 2015, the photographer Amina Kadous returned to Cairo, her hometown, after five years of being away. While she was gone, the city had changed in fundamental, historic ways. The 2011 Tahrir Square revolution deposed Hosni Mubarak, the fourth president of Egypt, who had been ruling since 1981. Mubarak's reign had been marred with accusations of corruption and abuse of power. As a result of the revolution, he was ordered to stand trial and eventually sentenced to life imprisonment. Five years on, what changes had this tectonic political shift induced into the landscape of Cairo? In what ways had the city altered, and equally significantly, in what ways had it not? Kadous set out to explore these questions in a photography project ongoing since 2017.

To her, the framed portraits that hung everywhere in the older parts of Cairo embodied a city attempting to negotiate its past and present. In an introduction to her project, she describes Cairo as "a city of icons," noting that it is part of Arabic culture to "glorify public icons, a concept rooted in our traditions and ethics." Her project attempts to interrogate this almost ritualistic etching of the country's public icons on the city walls. It probes the idea of memory and the act of remembering itself. She asks why "old iconic figures exist in such abundance" in the visual landscape of the city and what that represents.

The answer emerges in the longing for an imagined glorified past. Kadous describes it as a yearning for Egypt's *al-zaman al-gamîl*—the good old days—a nostalgia for a lost, ancient glory which may or may not have ever existed. She speaks of many of Cairo's residents being "raised on the stories of a glorious era," that people hope will one day return. This hope is pinned on the remembrance of past icons, each of whom represents different political ideologies. The inhabitants of the spaces these historical figures exist



ABOVE: In a shop in the Darb el Ahmar neighbourhood of old Cairo, a portrait of the shop keeper's father is placed among other items.



in may change—the café's owners, the apartment's residents come and go—but the icons remain on the cracked walls, almost forging a new relationship with each subsequent generation. "The images on the walls become part of the identity of the place itself," Kadous told me. "Some people are attached to the icons."

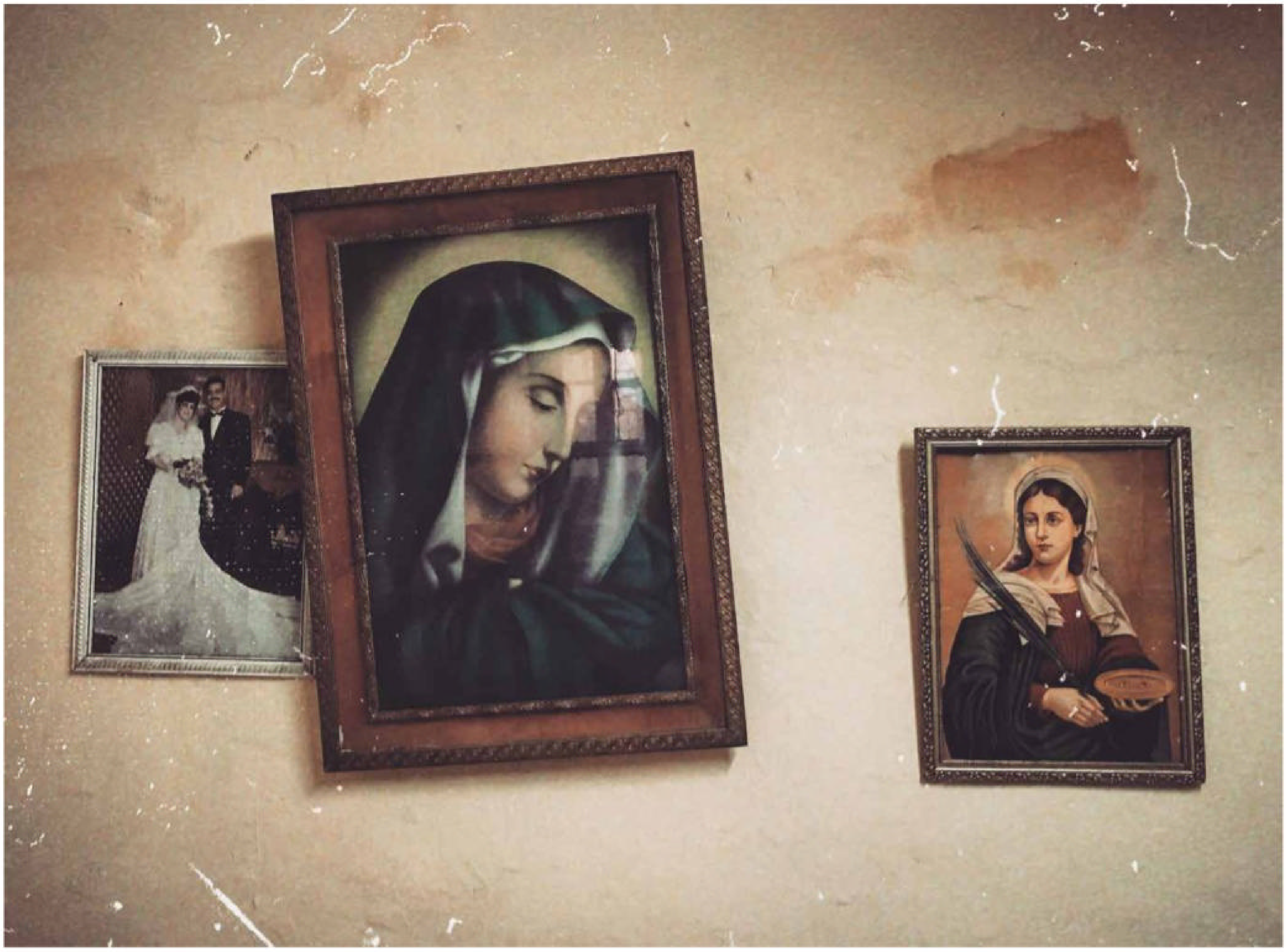
In one photograph in Alexandria along the northern coast of Egypt, in the neighbourhoods of Mena El Basal and Gomorok, we see the inside wall of a security office at a cotton manufacturing company. Between the countless framed messages praising Allah are four clocks without hands. Above them rests a portrait of Muhammad Anwar El-Sadat, Egypt's third president, who served from 1970 to 1981. Sadat succeeded Gamal Abdel Nasser, who was a commander of the Free Officers movement—a group of nationalist army officers—which triggered a revolution that toppled the Egyptian king Farouk in 1952.

A portrait of Farouk can be seen on a begrimed wall in another photograph Kadous makes. Mohammed, who works in a shoe workshop in Al Darb Al Ahmar, an old historic neighbourhood of Cairo, looks up longingly at this portrait. The area is home to many artists' workshops, and the local population has struggled for decades to build a sustainable economy. "I wish his days would return," Mohammed told Kadous. He preferred to live in the possibilities of that imagined past rather than the strange and harsher realities of the present.

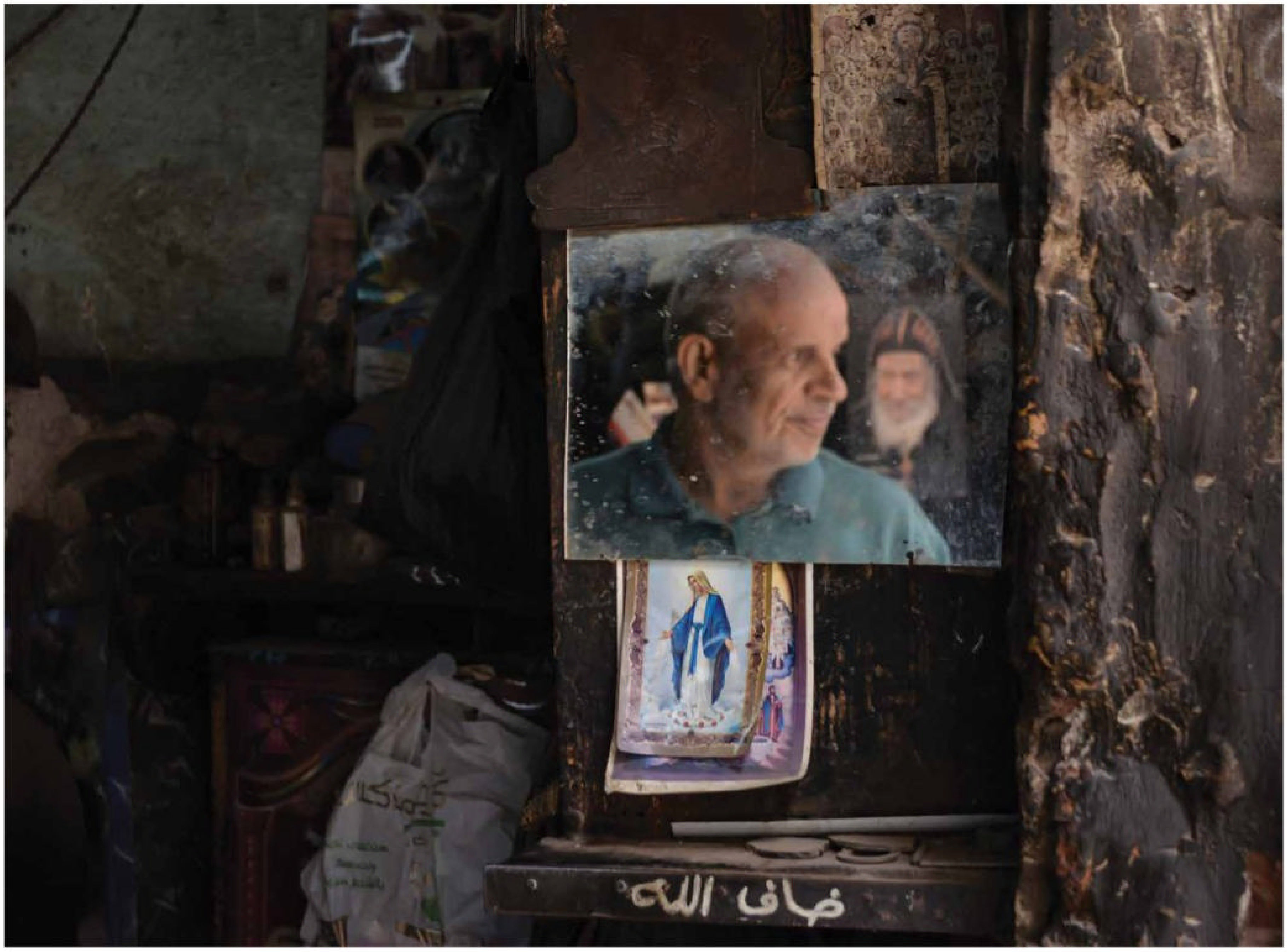
Mohammed is not alone in this. In his introduction to *Between the Eyes* by David Levi Strauss, the artist and critic John Berger writes, "People everywhere—under very different conditions—are asking themselves: Where are we? The question is historical not geographical. What are we living through? Where are we being taken? What have we lost? How to continue without a plausible vision of

LEFT: Inside a metal workshop in Bab El Khalq in old Cairo, a portrait of Sadat sits amid other cluttered items.

BELOW: Inside an apartment in El Mosky, a neighbourhood mainly populated by Coptic and Orthodox Christians, a photo of the Virgin Mary is hung next to the wedding photo of the apartment owners.



BELOW: An image of Pope Shenouda III reflected through a mirror in a metal workshop in the deep alleys of Cairo’s Al Sabtia neighbourhood. Shenouda III is considered one of the greatest powers in Egyptian, and African, history.



the future? Why have we lost any view of what is beyond a lifetime?”

These questions, a collective nostalgia and a sense of a constructed history permeate Kadous’ work. The sites of *al-zaman al-gamîl* stand in contrast to the present, the idea of an authentic, pure and unblemished past confronts a messy and, as Kadous said, “miserable” present. Her photos speak of this tussle, of a city trapped between many imagined pasts and uncertain presents.

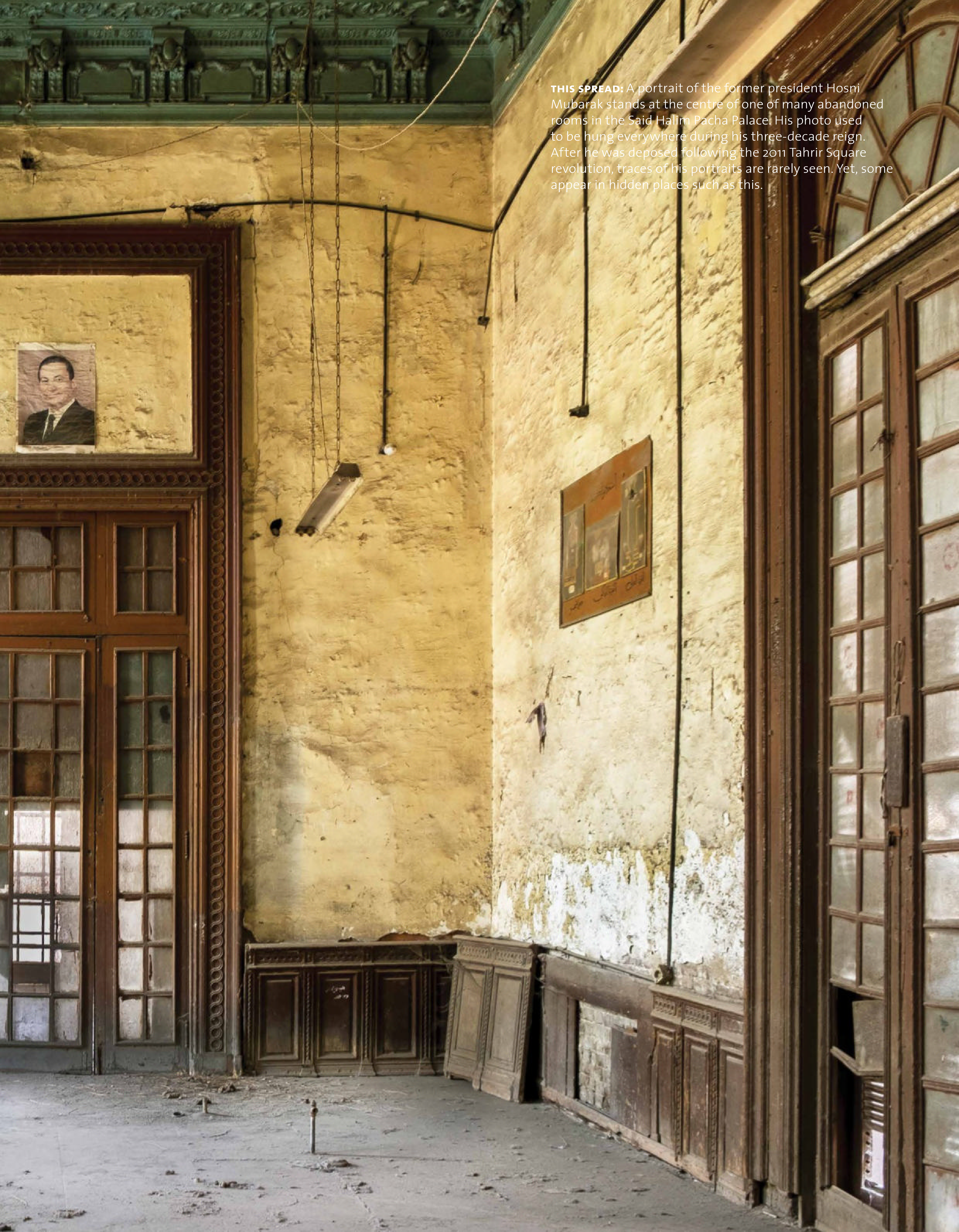
Nermin Elsherif, a critical geographer, designer and urban researcher from Egypt, writes that “examining nostalgia as a discourse in which the imaginary of the ideal nation is negotiated offers insights into the values, expectations, and frustrations of the proponents of *al-zaman al-gamîl*. It reveals how they imagine themselves as ideal citizens in an imagined ideal nation.” The tension that we see in Kadous’s work stems from her own negotiations with the imagined ideal nation, exploring her own identity and ties with a city she once knew, which changed fundamentally while she was away.

In another photograph, we see a man gazing out from what looks like the kitchen area of an old coffeeshop. A portrait of Nasser hangs above a television. Meanwhile, the television plays a 1955 film starring Farid Shawky, recognised as the “king” of Egyptian cinema. If it were not for the tiny pops of red on the screen or of the red hoses of hookahs aligning the top right shelf, this could be mistaken for a monotone, greyscale image that is the hallmark of old photographs.

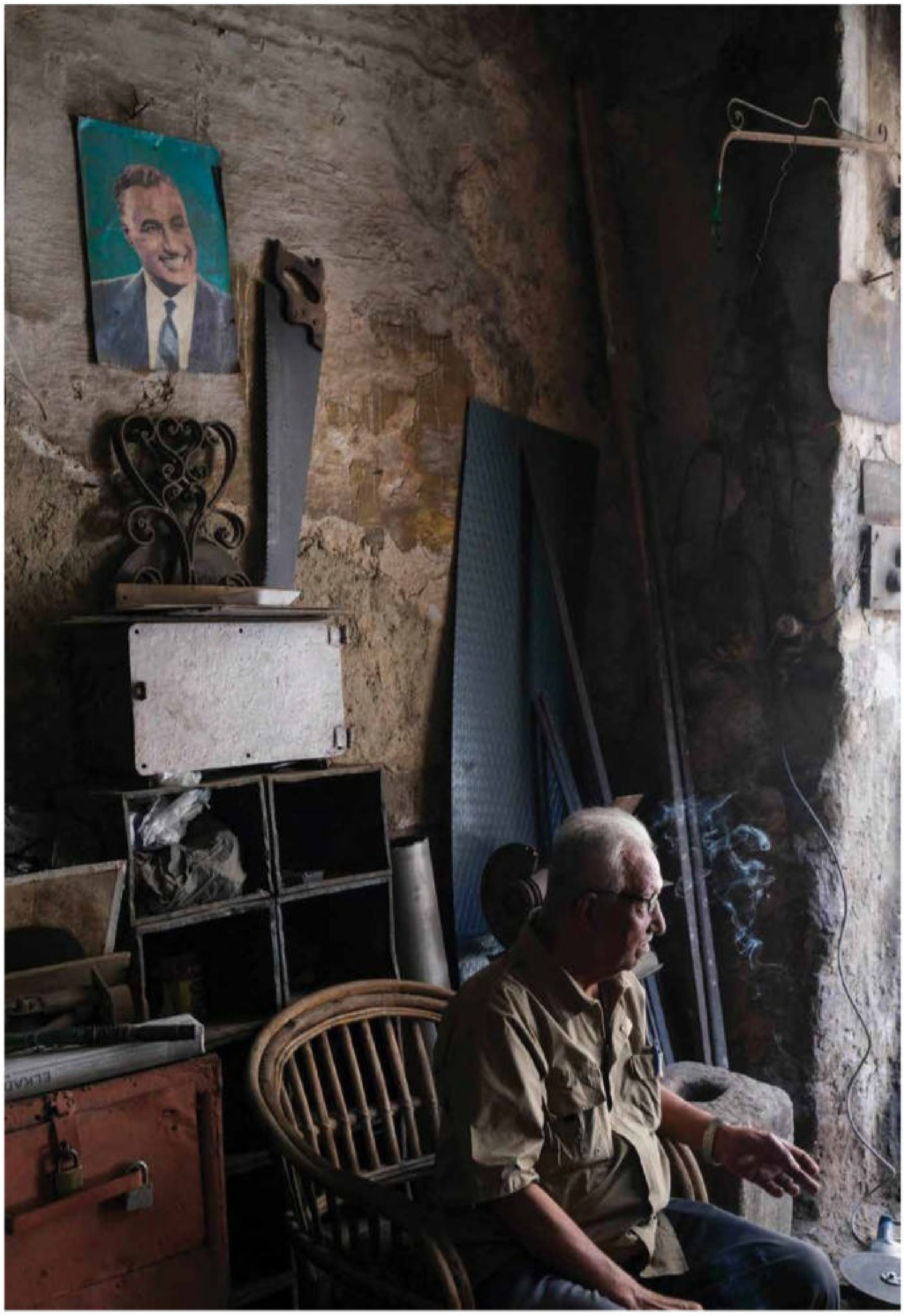
Kadous’s work also includes a throwback to the Mubarak era. In one photograph, Kadous shows us the forgotten remains of the palace of Ottoman statesman Said Halim Pasha. After his assassination, in 1921, the palace came under the control of King Fuad I and was converted to a school called El Nasriyah during the British colonial period.

RIGHT: Inside one of the oldest auction shops for antiques and memorabilia in downtown Cairo, a portrait of Sadat is set among miscellaneous tools on a shelf. A small group collage of other former presidents appears as well, including Mohamed Naguib and Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Quality Street



THIS SPREAD: A portrait of the former president Hosni Mubarak stands at the centre of one of many abandoned rooms in the Said Halim Pacha Palace. His photo used to be hung everywhere during his three-decade reign. After he was deposed following the 2011 Tahrir Square revolution, traces of his portraits are rarely seen. Yet, some appear in hidden places such as this.



ABOVE: Am Araby, an old Cairo resident, sits inside his blacksmith and welding workshop. A portrait of Nasser appears above him. Araby remembers the days he used to see the former president daily as he passed by on the street in a cabrio car, heading to a military parade.

The school was well reputed and ran till 1952. Since then, this relic of the Ottoman Empire has closed its doors to the public. In her photograph, we see the grand structures of the Italian architect Antonia Lasciac: tall, mustard walls that might be slightly discoloured from decades of abandon and a deep, forest-green frieze, with light streaming in through broken window panels. In the middle is an ageing printed photograph of Mubarak.

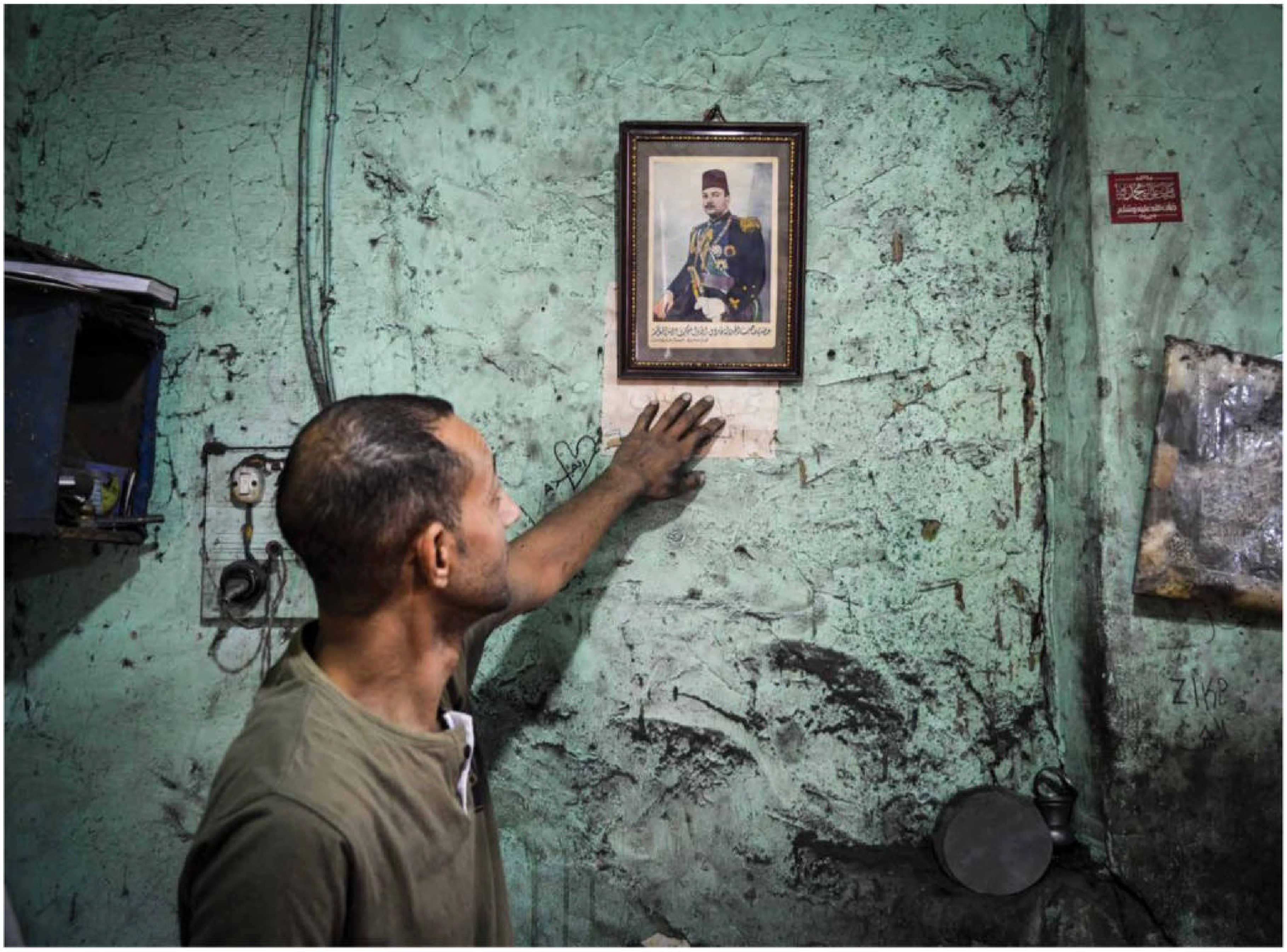
This was a rare find. Since the Tahrir Square revolution, traces of Mubarak's portraits are hardly seen in Cairo. "You are confronted by his famous smile and gaze as you enter the room," Kadous said. "His famous photo used to be hung everywhere during his days and it was demolished completely after the revolution, trying to leave no traces of his time. Yet some appear in hidden places like this one."

In his book *The Act of Seeing*, the German filmmaker Wim Wenders writes, "The most political decision you make is where you direct people's eyes. In other words, what you show people, day in and day out, is political … And the most politically indoctrinating thing you can do to a human being is to show him, every day, that there can be no change." Though Egypt has seen many political changes, Kadous shows us the stale leftovers of a past that seems to be always imagined as better than the present.

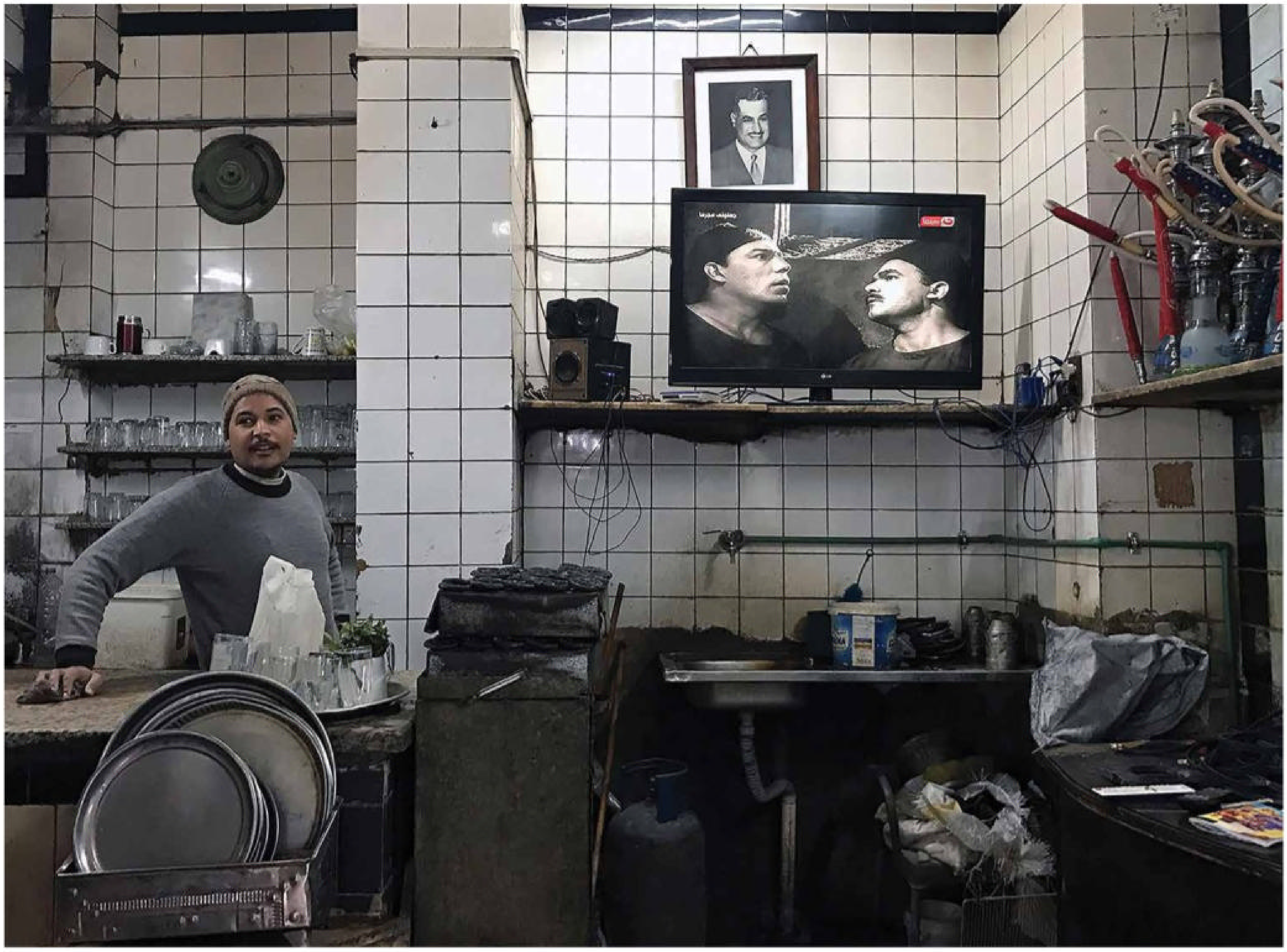
The icons revered on Cairo's walls are not always political. Her work shows scenes of Pope Shenouda III of Alexandria alongside Mary and Jesus, tucked behind mirrors and pasted bills. In one photograph, inside an old spice shop, we see a wall covered in papers and pictures of the pope, held together by binder clips. In the foreground, we see another small image of the pope between a set of rusty scales. "The owner has multiple symbolic portraits of Pope Shenouda III and the Virgin Mary with Jesus hanging on every wall, protecting the space," Kadous said.

For her, this photo project is not only a way to understand her city, but to also document what she sees as in the process of being erased. Those who took part in the Tahrir Square uprising were fighting for a renewed future. In the stirring, rebellious hope of that moment, they perhaps would not have foreseen that, a decade later, Egypt would be in the throes of another regime cracking down on dissent. Under the present

BELOW: Mohammed, an employee in a shoe shop in the Darb Al Ahmar neighbourhood of old Cairo, points to a portrait of Farouk, the penultimate king of Egypt. "I wish his days would return," Mohammed said. He preferred to live in the possibilities of an imagined past rather than the present's strange and harsher realities.



BELOW: In an old coffeeshop in downtown Cairo, a portrait of Nasser looks down at the patrons, as an old Arabic film plays on the screen. Such scenes are common in areas of downtown and old Cairo where people are still trapped in timelines of the past.



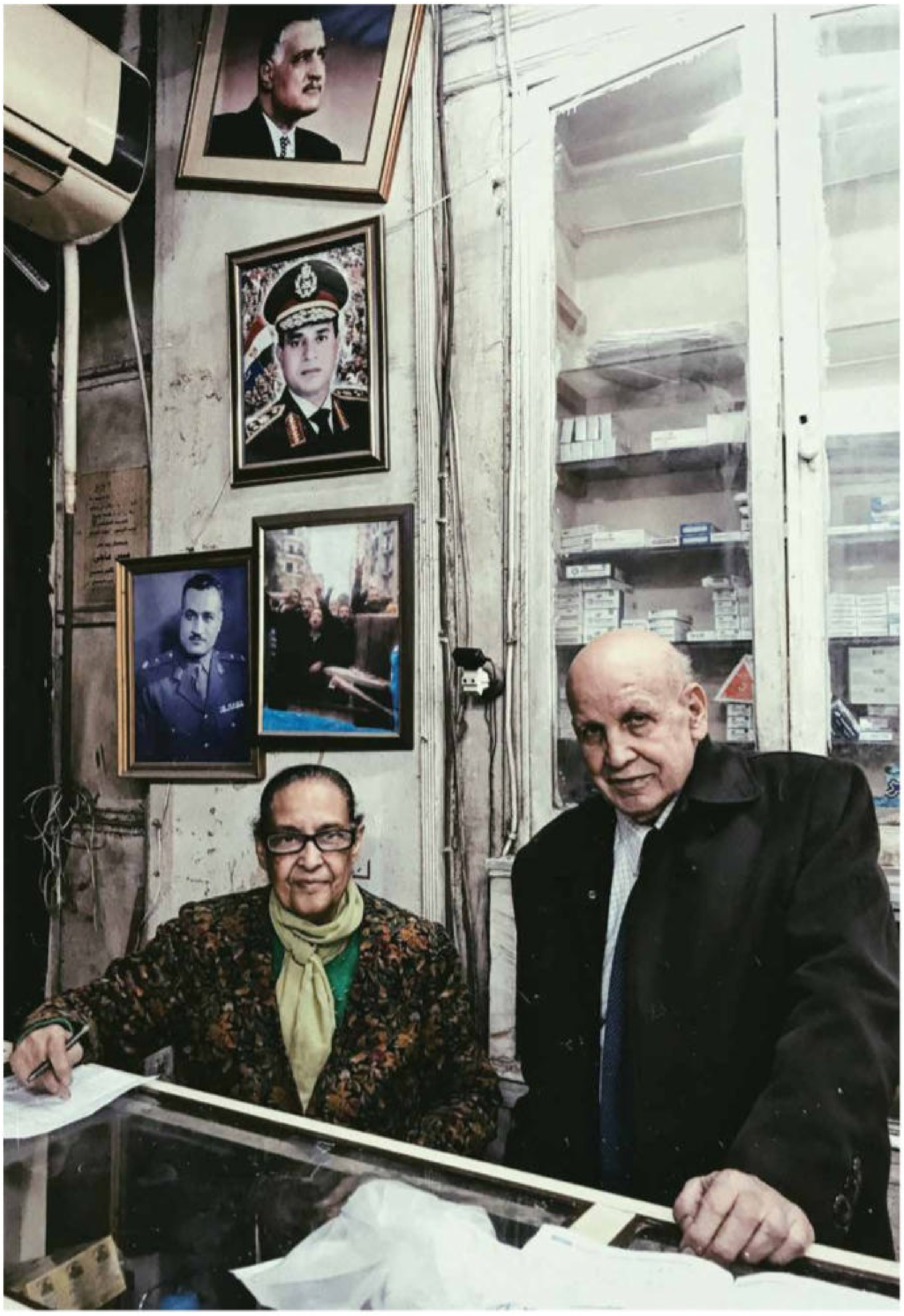
government of Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, Cairo is further undergoing new measures that could once again change it fundamentally. “Roads and bridges are being built at the cost of historical spaces,” Kadous said.

Not pictured in her work is the shiny New Administrative Capital being built by Sisi’s government on the outskirts of Cairo, about forty-five kilometres from the Nile. A Reuters report described the “Designed as a high-tech smart city that will house 6.5 million people and relieve congestion in Cairo, it includes government and busi- ness districts, a giant park, and a diplomatic quarter as yet unbuilt,” a Reuters report described. Some believe that this new capital will deepen existing gaps between classes, while others are outraged by the shifting of large funds away from an already crumbling capital city that they fear may soon become a relic. In essence, they worry that the capital itself is being erased and shifted out.

In this landscape, Kadous records and documents the remnants of old Cairo. She interrogates the hope of *al-zaman al-gamîl,* the atrocities of the colonial reign and the future of the city. She described the camera “as a tool of healing” during a process of change. “The reason I picked up photography was so we can document the change before it happens,” she said.

In one photograph of an old pharmacy—or *agzakhana*, as they used to be called—there is an older couple. The woman looks back with a determination and her husband beside her looks worn out, tired. Behind them sit the portraits of Nasser and Sisi, sharing a space, though their regimes are separated by nearly half a century. Kadous chose to name this photograph “History Repeats Itself,” because “people call El-Sisi the ‘Nasser of our time.’” The woman in this photograph considers herself a Nasserite and a socialist. She remembers with a fondness how “glorious” the Nasser era was. Despite her husband being a strong anti-socialist, the couple remains bonded together.

Yet, in Kadous’s work, what we see are not simply portraits of people but a portrait of the city itself, and the ways in which it is remembered. We see the relationship between the people she places within her frame and the people they choose to frame on their walls. Through this emerges a layered canvas of Cairo, the narrative of an ongoing contestation to define both its past and its present.



ABOVE: A couple who own an old pharmacy, or *agzakhana*. The woman is a supporter of the current president Abdel Fattah *El-Sisi*. Once a true Nasserite and a loyal socialist, she continues to cherish Nasser, talking about his time and how glorious it used to be. Her husband is a staunch anti-socialist. However, they said, politics does not interfere with their marriage, and the couple remains bonded together.

BETWEEN TWO POLES

Jalalul Haq and the idea of the superhuman

/ RELIGION

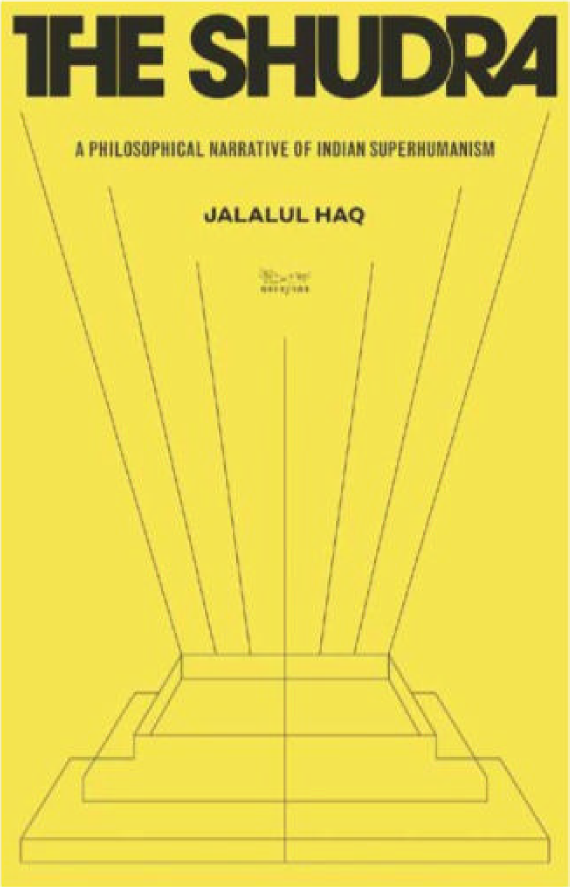
HUZAIFA OMAIR SIDDIQI

LIKE A DETECTIVE STORY, Jalalul Haq's philosophical work *The Shudra: A Philosophical Narrative of Indian Superhumanism* begins with a death. Purusha, the creator-god in the "Purusha Sukta" of the Rigveda, is sacrificed in order to create the world. This death is also the myth that legitimises the birth of the caste system, since, according to the hymn, the caste order emerges after this sacrifice. The mouth of Purusha becomes the Brahmin, the arms become the Kshatriya, the thighs become the Vaishya and the feet become the Shudra. "When God was thus killed, and man along with him, caste was born," Haq writes. "With the death of man, the 'caste-man' is born, who is not man at all. The caste-man is either higher, superior, or lower, inferior."

A version of this myth, Haq suggests, is to be found at the end of a different tradition, within Western philosophy. In the nineteenth century, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche pronounced "the death of god" in his book *The Gay Science*. For Nietzsche, this meant that the divinely ordained moral order of Christianity had been undone by the philosophical and scientific discoveries of the Enlightenment. Less than a century later, the French philosopher Michel Foucault argued, in *The Order of Things*, that man's "death" followed the "death of god." The Enlightenment, he opined, had initially constructed man as the object of the human sciences of anthropology, psychology, linguistics and economics. It was this figure that was supposed to replace the role of god. But for linguistics, the focus on humans as the speaking subject disappeared in favour of language itself. For economics, the relations of production came to occupy a central place, eclipsing man as the producer of commodities. For psychology, man as the thinker of thoughts gave way to the study of mental processes.

Haq's work attempts to trace connections between this mythical sacrifice with the discourse of the death of god in Germany in the nineteenth century. His work is what we could call a typology, the development of a theory of types or civilisational tendencies. He refers to these types as "the ascetic" and "the priest," and his books seek to unearth their presence in the Eastern and Western philosophical and religious traditions. A professor of philosophy at Aligarh Muslim University, Haq wrote his doctoral thesis on the British philosopher Bertrand Russell and has been a member of the governing body of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research. The books he has published defy strict categorisation. Most of them were published by an obscure press called the Institute of Objective Studies in the 1990s and early 2000s, though

Haq wrote at length about diverse branches of philosophy and political thought, so his books defy strict categorisation.



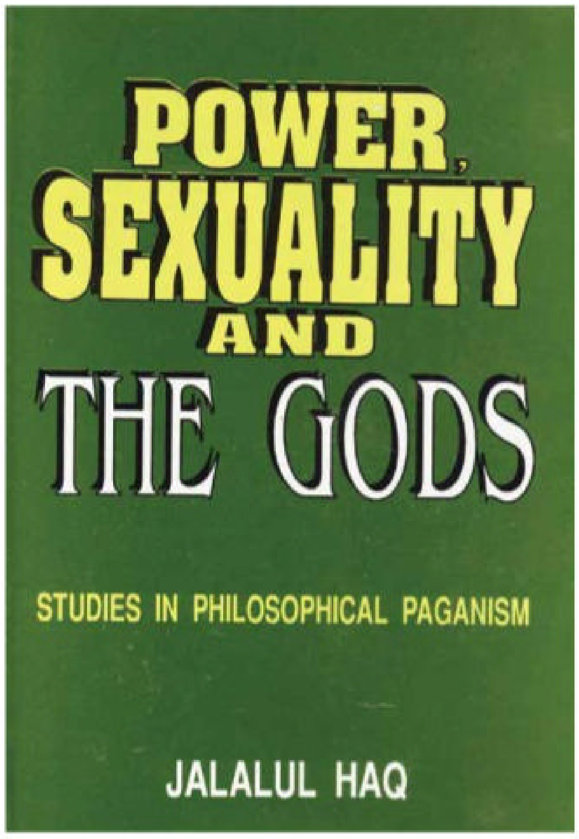
The Shudra was revised and published by Navayana in 2021.

Rather than settling in an academic niche, Haq wrote at length about considerably diverse branches of philosophy and political thought. For instance, his texts from the 1990s, such as *The Shudra*, examine the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the writings of the eighth-century theologian Shankara, as well as Buddhism and Jainism. *Postmodernity, Paganism and Islam* looks at European thinkers such as Foucault, Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida, while *Power, Sexuality and the Gods* reflects on philosophers and public figures, including Plato, Augustine, Aurobindo and Nietzsche. *Nation and Nation-Worship in India* analyses the political figures Jawaharlal Nehru and VD Savarkar, and his most recent book, published in 2014 and titled *Hindu Tolerance: Myth and Truth*, examines the nineteenth-century Indian religious figures Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Vivekananda.

The running thread that connects Haq's books is the idea that philosophers, whether in the East or the West, have always oscillated between the construction of two extreme types or tendencies. "Like any other civilisation, India too had been subject to the pull and pressure of two opposite forces: of pity and withdrawal on the one hand, and power and indulgence on the other," Haq writes. "As represented by ascetics and priests respectively, the twin forces, though seemingly opposite, formed an internal unity at both metaphysical and historical-existential levels." In Haq's terms, the ascetic worldview is one that renounces society, while the priestly worldview deeply engages with society in order to fulfil a lust for power, wealth and glory.

But Haq argues that, though they are opposed, "the priest and the ascetic become interchangeable." They are both conceived of as "superhuman" in their own way, the first through a renunciation of social bonds and the second through hubris and power. These two excessive tendencies that Haq locates within a society, then, are not opposed to each other, except in a superficial way. What they are really opposed to is what they view as the "subhuman," the population that must be kept under their control. Haq's argument is also that the tendencies of ascetism and priesthood are not limited to the Indian subcontinent but are to be found across philosophical and religious systems that deal with human ethics.

Haq's typology is certainly not the first attempt to relate the foundations of the caste system with global phenomena. Jotiba Phule's pioneering work *Gulamgiri* had already made that connection in 1873, for instance. The perspective Haq offers, though, is existential rather than sociological: "varna was also not a product of the accidents of history—something that happened 'later,' as the apologists would like us to believe. It was right there at the beginning of history, in fact from the time of the creation of the world as espoused in the 'Purusha Sukta' of the *Rig Veda*."



Haq's work is an investigation into the symptoms of a religious and philosophical tendency he calls "superhumanism."

THE USEFULNESS OF HAQ'S PERSPECTIVE may be questionable for anthropologists, sociologists and historians who have already developed fundamental perspectives on caste. Ideological theories surrounding caste argue that the material practices that characterise the caste system, such as physical segregation, the interdiction of intermarriages and commensality, the restrictions to certain professions and exclusion from education, can only be sustained and reproduced through social and religious codes. These codes generate and sustain material practices, rather than the other way round. Phule and BR Ambedkar wrote at length about how the caste system's regressive ideas justify and increase social inequality, and how these are legitimised by religious texts. The French anthropologist Louis Dumont's 1966 book *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implica-*

tions makes the claim that the Indian caste system is based on the distinction between purity and pollution, which derives its authority from ancient religious texts.

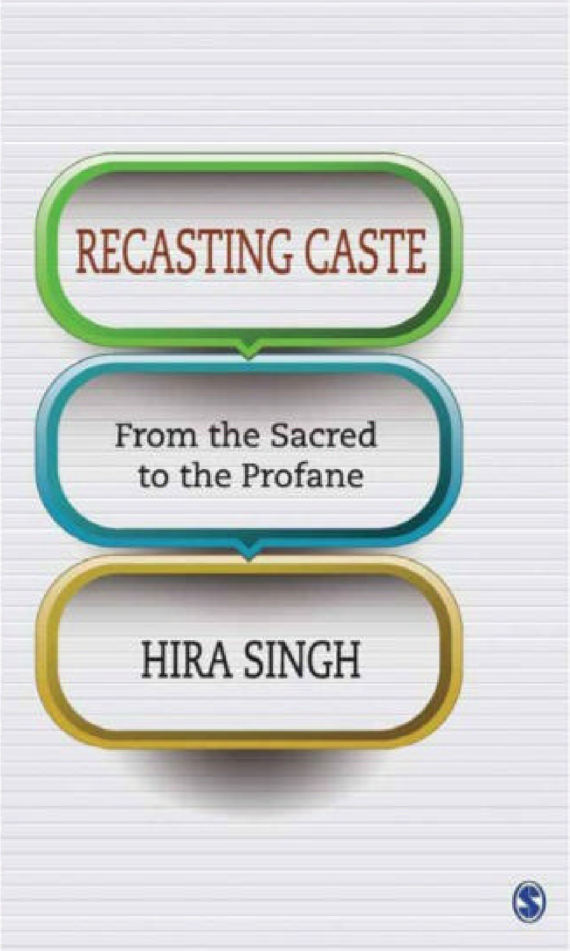
Materialist and Marxist theories of caste—visible, for instance, in Hira Singh's *Recasting Caste: From the Sacred to the Profane*—argue that the "failure to understand the centrality of land rights in the caste system is the single most serious limitation of *Homo Hierarchicus*," adding that this is apparent in other sociological takes on caste. Such analyses do not invalidate the cultural aspects of caste but seek to ground it in more material relations, such as which groups possess land. In her essay "Towards a Marxist Analysis of Caste," Gail Omvedt writes that caste "existed not simply at the level of the cultural superstructure—not only in terms of 'ideas' of purity and pollution or 'rules' about intermarriage and interdining—but as part of the relations of production themselves. And when feudalism was maintained in a transformed form under colonial rule, caste also was maintained at the level of 'economic' relations as well." According to Omvedt, we need specific analyses to understand how seemingly cultural aspects, such as interdictions and segregation, are not always simply cultural but are related to the means of production.

Texts from the 1990s, such as *The Shudra*, examine the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the writings of the eighth-century theologian Shankara, as well as Buddhism and Jainism.

Haq suggests that it is not enough to assume that the social practices of purity and pollution can explain the caste system, since both of these presuppose the existence of a stratified society that has already decided what is pure and what is polluting. On the other hand, materialist theories rely on specific relations of production that do not extend across historical periods and, therefore, do little to help explain the persistence of caste oppression across different epochs. While Haq's answer might not be entirely convincing to social scientists, its gist lies in the paradoxical concept of an asocial practice. He calls this "ascetism," arguing that the origins of social inequality must lie in a spiritual rather than a social practice—one that, if not anti-social, is at least asocial—that involves a withdrawal from society. Haq implies that caste is not just a sociological category but is originally the product of a persistently human existential tendency.

Haq organises this reading via his reflections on types. The ascetic type, he writes, is the renunciate who withdraws from society. He leaves behind the comforts of the world and practises extreme austerity. His goal is not just to abandon society but also its relic, the self. After performing practices of penance, self-mortification and self-negation, he returns as the sage. When he does so, Haq writes, power comes naturally to the ascetic: "he is naturally inhered to become a priest. … ascetic disempowerment automatically gives birth to the economy of priestly power." Such a situation arises because the ascetic type has, through his renunciation, penance and arrival at self-realisation, risen above personal desire and various warring factions within society. Not only can he adjudicate between factions, he can also create laws that will look towards the benefit of society as a whole, rather than a few sections within it. In this way, the ascetic becomes the lawgiver: "since the ascetic-priest is disinterested, he can play the game of power more indulgently and without risking any blemish or risk to his soul's purity. As a motiveless and all-wise person, his advice is binding on kings, on the nobility and on the people at large."

The return of the ascetic to the society is the moment when two levels of norms are instituted: one for ordinary mortals, and the other for supermen—priests who have transcended the



The running thread that connects Haq's books is the idea that philosophers have oscillated between two extreme types or tendencies.

norms and laws that apply to others. Haq's theory is that a spiritual practice such as ascetism gives rise to priesthood, which then justifies extreme hierarchy and inequality. His work is an investigation into this dynamic, and the form it takes is the symptom of a religious and philosophical disease he calls "superhumanism." According to him, this phenomenon appears repeatedly and is more virulent in some cultures, but endemic to all.

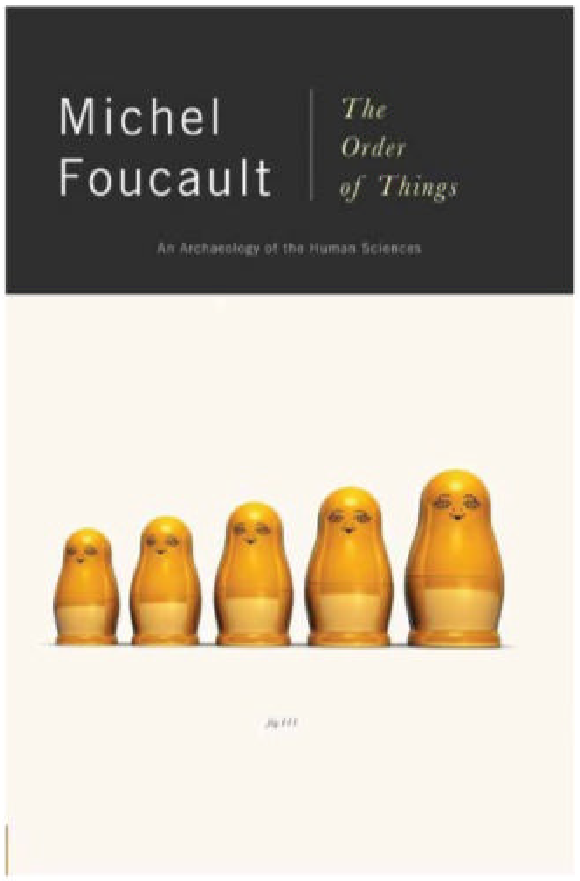
Haq's argument also explores the various attempts made throughout history to grapple with it. This is what he calls, in *Post-Modernity, Paganism and Islam*, the "search for the elusive middle." He writes that "these two notions are parasitic on a third notion which is the idea of the 'middle'. Both the excess and the deficiency of anything realise themselves with reference and with respect to what is a *middle* of them." It is this middle, which Haq calls "man," that brings together the opposing tendencies of ascetic withdrawal and a priestly lust for power in a balance of sorts. In Haq's view, several religious and ethical systems, from the Platonic school in Greece to Hindu and Buddhist ethical systems, have grappled with this precise problem.

IN *THE SHUDRA*, within the span of a few hundred pages, Haq weaves a narrative of the recurrent death of man and the birth of the caste-man in Indian philosophical history, from the time of the Vedic rishis and munis, through Buddhist and Jain thought, to the philosophy of the eighth-century religious thinker Shankara. The underlying argument is that there is no category of the "human" in Indian thought, that the history of the Indian subcontinent is populated instead by superhumans and subhumans. The creators of this situation, Haq writes, were the ascetic and the priest: "they kill Purusha, the God, and thereby kill purusha, the spiritual-cultural man."

The first chapter of *The Shudra*, covers the pre-Vedic age up until the time of the Upanishads, the second chapter explores the Buddhist and Jain reaction to Brahminical priestly dominance and the third examines the counter-reaction embodied in the Bhagavad Gita and Shankara's *Advaita Vedanta*. Haq's narrative arc begins with two varieties of ascetism, that of the munis, who were a cult of wandering ascetics described in the Rigveda and the cult of Rudra, who is later called Shiva. While he writes that these two ascetic traditions were very different from each other, they were together opposed to the cult of sacrifice, that of the priests. What united the two ascetic cults with the priests was a widespread belief that "through self-mortification one can enjoy control over the dark and occult forces of nature."

In *Power, Sexuality and the Gods* and *Post-modernity, Paganism and Islam*, Haq writes that the death of Purusha is just one of a series of speculations about the figurative deaths of god and man. He quotes Foucault here as well: "In our own day, and once again Nietzsche indicated the turning point from a long way off, it is not so much the death of God that is affirmed as the end of man." In *Post-modernity, Paganism and Islam* Haq also cites Foucault's approach to reading history as a narrative of discontinuous breaks and ruptures. According to Foucault, the development of the social or human sciences, such as anthropology, economics and linguistics, led to the effacement of the humanist conceptions of man as the thinker of thoughts, the subject of rights and the agent of action.

But, unlike Foucault, who seemingly celebrates this effacement in the last line of *The Order of Things*—"one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea"—Haq argues that this is not to be celebrated. Rather, the perpetrators of this scenario, by which he means the twin tendencies of ascetic withdrawal and priestly indulgence, have to be tracked down wherever they



appear in systems of philosophy of theology. This is what all of Haq's books seek to do: to find the ascetic and the priest wherever they hide, whichever masks they wear. In that sense, Haq seeks the end of the era of philosophical superhumanism.

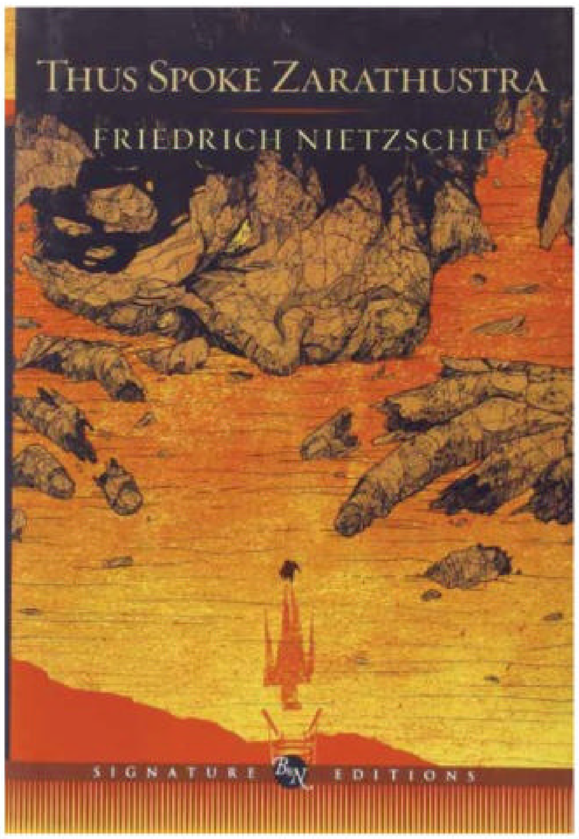
It is not only the philosophers of the East who were unable to find a middle path between the ascetic's tendency to renounce the world and the priestly tendency to dominate. According to Haq, a similar situation arose in Western philosophy, from the time of Plato and the early Christian thinkers to the postmodernists, where two excesses reinforce each other and erase the category of "man." Plato's thought did quite consciously seek to find a mode of temperate living. In Haq's retelling in *Power, Sexuality and the Gods*, Plato was inspired by Socrates, who was very much a man of the world and eschewed both ascetic tendencies and the lust for political power. In following Socrates, Plato accommodated the pleasures of the body and gave them a pride of place in his system, which encouraged physical exercise for both sexes, as is noted in his book *The Republic*.

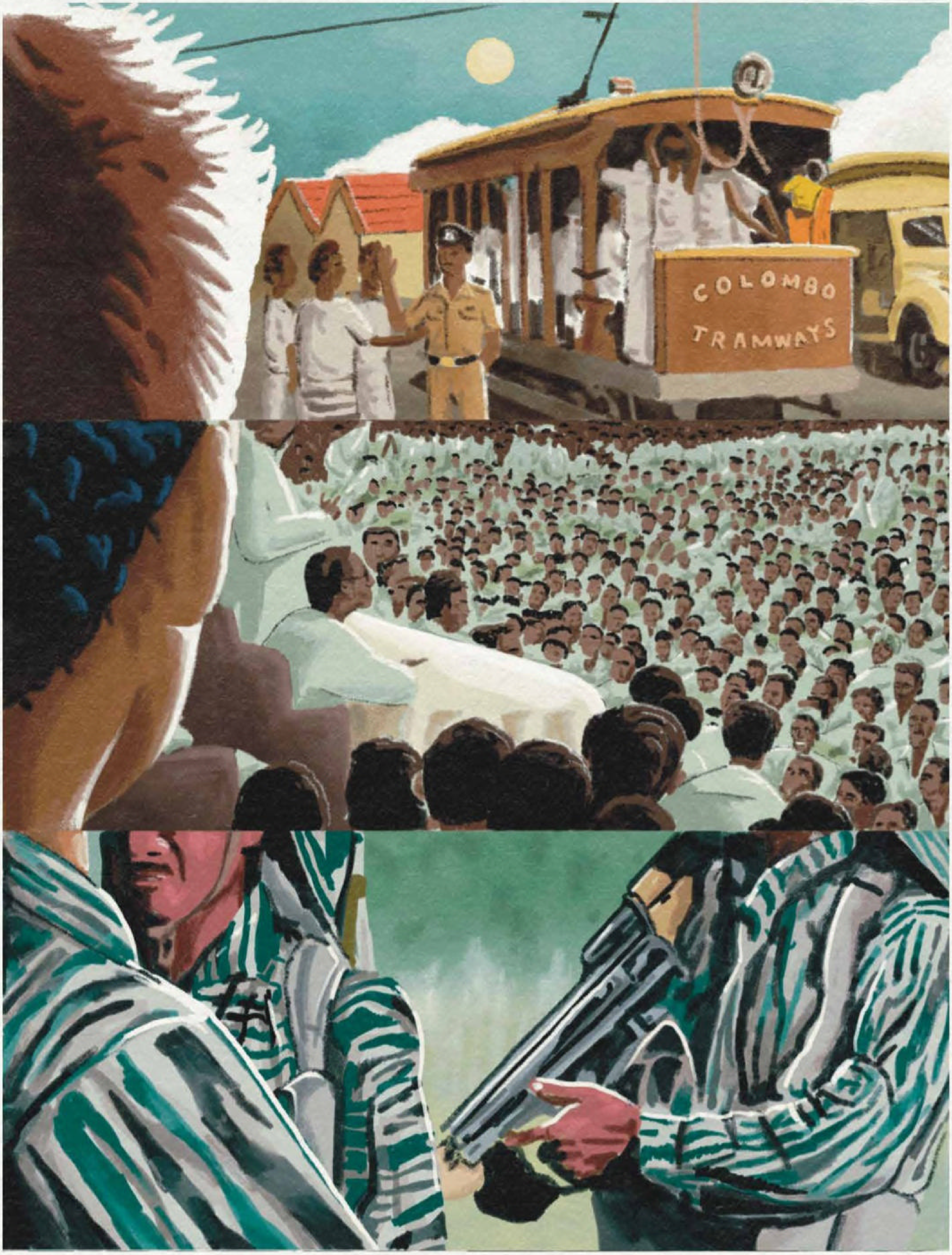
But, at the same time, Haq writes, Socrates, while encouraging a temperate life, was not really able to define it positively. This led Plato, in his desire to understand the ideal of a temperate life, to turn to the ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras. Plato began to believe that geometry and the science of numbers could more profitably provide a path to the virtuous life. If Socrates had influenced Plato to search for the ideal essence of things, it was Pythagoras who made him think of these essences as numbers. But, for Plato, numbers as eternal forms and ideas were not in the material world of things, and this could only mean that, in his formulation, a truly virtuous life had to recognise its fall from the ideal and heavenly realm of forms. According to Haq, this opened up to a kind of ascetic mysticism and renunciation that diverted from the original Socratic inspiration.

The philosophy and theology of renunciation, embodied in particular in the monasticism of the Catholic Church, was what came under strenuous attack in the late nineteenth century by Nietzsche, who counterposed to the Christian will to pity what he called a will to power. For Nietzsche, the doctrine of Christianity encouraged the rule of the weak over the strong, by valorising things like forgiveness, pity and mercy. The Christian priests relied on convincing people to believe in entities and ideas such as god, immortality and divine redemption in order to subdue the strong to their will. This was the way that they propagated a theory of spiritual and social equality that only served to strengthen the rule of the weak over the strong. For Nietzsche, on the other hand, it was time for "the strong," whom he variously called the masters and the nobility in *The Genealogy of Morals*, to break this illusion and, in killing god, break the spell of the will to pity.

For Haq, Nietzsche marks the beginning of the repudiation of humanism in the West, but he argues that Nietzsche's concept of the superman is not a break with the tradition that effaces the human, but rather an unwitting continuation of it. Postmodernist philosophers, as Haq writes in *Post-modernity, Paganism and Islam*, were heavily influenced by Nietzsche and were, in this respect, anti-Platonic. They advocated not just excessive transgression of contemporary social norms but also excessive criticality—including applying the tools of critical thought to itself, leading to a situation where all the fundamental concepts of philosophy, such as the subject and consciousness, were hollowed out. In the end, for Haq, despite their theoretical innovations, postmodernist philosophies remained faithful to the principle of superhumanism that was embedded in both Platonic and Nietzschean theories.

Haq traces narratives surrounding superhumanism in philosophical and religious systems, focussing in particular on a combination of ascetic withdrawal and priestly indulgence, as well as justifications of social inequality and the absence of the "human." His books, which have languished for long in obscurity and neglect, can simultaneously appraise us about ideas regarding the annihilation of caste as well as contributions to philosophical thought. ■




COLOMBO
TRAMWAYS

Agitation and mourning in Sri Lanka

The Use and Abuse of History

/ LITERATURE

ASHIK KAHINA

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
AKILA WEERASINGHE

HOWEVER WE JUDGE the Aragalaya that ended in Sri Lanka last year—not with a bang but with a whimper—it offered an occasion to watch and think about the possibilities and the limits of a politics reliant on historical consciousness. Whether the more liberal part of the majority demanding the island's true diversity be recognised or Tamil critics reminding us that the Rajapaksas had been criminals of the worst sort for decades before the Sinhala public took notice, the movement fomented a political discourse that called for a truer recognition of history, truth or record, blaming the denial (or ignorance) of history for the country's, and the movement's, ills.

Since the birth of the modern nation state in Western Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, history has been made to assume the role of translating us from more essential forms of identification to a selfhood grounded in the abstractions of citizenship or class. This involved a shift from the circular or eschatological timelines offered by religions and the social systems they sanctioned, in which fate and divine right rule, to the linear, progressive time in which we make our own fates and orders. This transformation is enacted most famously in the work of Marx and Hegel, but also drives the work of BR Ambedkar and Periyar.

The historical novel, born coeval with the secular nation, has been an important tool whereby the instincts requisite to the latter have been instilled in a public whose formation—and status as citizenry—remains nascent and partial. In the words of the Hungarian Marxist literary critic György Lukács, "what in Morgan, Marx and Engels was worked out and proved with theoretical and historical clarity, lives, moves and has its being poetically in the best historical novels." That is, to demonstrate in abstract terms, important as it may be, will never transform human beings. But the novel can.

In his monumental work of criticism *The Historical Novel*, Lukács lays out the essential tendencies of such a novel. Unlike in the epic, the historical novel's antecedent as nation-story, the protagonist will not be a king or a general but an ordinary citizen, not someone who effects historical events but one who gets caught up in them. This citizen-hero will possess a certain ambiguity, not identifying too wholly with any of the factions involved in the narrative's conflict. Real historical figures appear but are peripheral to the plot. The novel must seek to represent the whole of a society rather than a fragment. The most paradigmatic historical novels—Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, for example—are so considered because they take up the subject of the epic, the crystallisation of national identity through battle between good and evil, but replace its allegory and drama of essence with the uncertainties of psychological realism.

The historical novel, in its long evolution, has grown distant from Lukács's criteria. The last century saw few narratives of progress, many of decline. Still, novels that look to quicken a sense of history in readers keep appearing, believing that the violence of our times comes from amnesia, from a vacuum that history and truth should rightfully occupy.

In Sri Lanka, only one sprawling novel seems to fit Lukács' sense: Ambalavaner Sivanandan's *When Memory Dies*, published in 1997. Sivanandan is a lone and awkward presence in Sri Lankan literature. Though belonging to an upper-caste Tamil family with its roots and property in the agrarian north, he was born in Colombo. (In a late interview with *New Left Review*, he claimed to have had "no sense of being Tamil growing up.") His father's job as a postmaster meant a peripatetic upbringing across the provinces, whose hilly landscape, flora and estates are painted in the novel with tender familiarity. Sivanandan studied in Christian schools, where students and staff were mostly whites and Sinhala converts. At the University of Ceylon, where education became free in 1939, he was exposed to the dynamic ideological currents in which the educated Sinhalese were caught up. Lecturers at the university, many of whom had been to England or the Soviet Union, instilled in him a love of Marxism and English literature. On graduating, he became a teacher in the provinces until the pressure to support his family spurred him to join the Bank of Ceylon and settle in Colombo.

The anti-Tamil pogroms of 1958, a response to the Tamil demand for a measure of federal and linguistic autonomy in the north-east, convinced Sivanandan that Ceylon was unliveable, and he moved with his family to London while it was in the throes of the Notting Hill Race Riots. In London, where he worked as a librarian and edited the journal *Race and Class*, Sivanandan became, along with figures like Stuart Hall, part of a wide-reaching movement that saw, in anti-blackness, an occasion to rethink Marxism. Although his writings in this vein never attained the status or sophistication of Hall's, they found a serious readership among teachers, activists and organisers. It is with this background in Marxist internationalism and anti-racist thought built on notions of migration and diaspora that Sivanandan observed his country from afar.

In *When Memory Dies*—part autobiography, part family saga, part paradise won and duly lost—Sivanandan symphonically builds the story of Ceylon's modernity, from the slightest details of daily life to events of the grossest scale, suggesting a unity between all parts of life. The protagonists of the novel's three parts—Saha, born in colonial Ceylon, who leaves the agrarian north for the capital; his son Rajan, who flees to England after the 1958 riots; and Vijay, the illegitimate child of Rajan's wife, a culturally ambidextrous Sinhalese driven to Tamil Eelam as the rest of the country explodes with hatred—hold fast to the collective dream of a secular, democratic, socialist Sri Lanka as it turns into a collective nightmare. Each is an outsider, ignorant and therefore eager to learn, possessed of the doubt and humility that underlies rationality and righteousness, naturally untethered to a singular identity.

In the novel's first section, "Forgotten Mornings," Saha, a poor farmer's son, escapes the dour poverty of his Jaffna village for an education and a job in Colombo. Working as a clerk in a railway office, he is introduced to the more vibrant, epicurean culture of the Sinhalese. Here, Sivanandan introduces what, even as late as 2009, he sees as the main contradiction between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. The former's land is very lush and fertile, the latter's dry and unyielding, and the temperament of each corresponds to their land. The Tamils are poorer, and Saha has to send home the money that his Sinhalese friends spend on drinking. He does not socialise because it entails spending. The poor quality of the land in the north also partially accounts for the Tamils' high representation in government jobs: the work required constant travel and the Sinhalese were not willing to leave their land. Saha cultivates a friendship with Tissa, a zealous socialist and son of the veteran union organiser SW, with whom Saha stays as a paying guest. This both loosens him up and makes him graver, and he gives in to both the occasional drink and politics. (His duty to his family, however, separates him from his friend, who can prioritise principles over money.)

Across the growing distance between Tissa, who swiftly climbs the ranks of the ascendant Ceylon Labour Party—a child of the British Labour Party—and SW, who maintains that the labour movement should be led by workers, Saha is stretched like a taut rope. His admiration for Tissa gives out as he watches his head swell with ideology, removing him from the cares of family and daily life. Sivanandan portrays the strikes of the 1920s as the machinations of a CLP careless in its approach towards workers and enamoured by parliamentary power. The novel's first part ends with Tissa's dear friend Sultan being shot by the police at the 1929 tram workers' strike. As Tissa's cries over his body, the CLP founder, Alexander

In *When Memory Dies*—part autobiography, part family saga, part paradise won and duly lost—Sivanandan symphonically builds the story of Ceylon's modernity.

Ekanayake Gunasinha, announces that the strike has been called off and a settlement reached.

Through Saha's eyes, history and the movement of ideas look out of joint with life. This notion of history as dynamism, however, does not chime with Saha's own. He gives the name history not to the sturm und drang of governments, parties and movements he turns away from but to a lost precolonial way of being:

> there is no story to tell, no one story anyway, not since that day in 1505 when the fidalgo Don Laurenco de Almeida, resplendent in gold braid and epaulettes and hat plumed with all the birds of paradise, landed on our shores and broke us from our history. No one story, with a beginning and an end, no story that picks up from where the past left off, only bits and shards … and no story of the country but theirs, the *parangis*.' Except that we all bore the imprint of that history like a stigma, internalized it even, made it our own against our will, calling to memory the while to lose it by losing memory itself.

Here, "broke us" enacts the sense of being islanded from India—the origin of both Tamils and Sinhalese. Saha points out two histories: the Sri Lankan people's own, true history and another accorded to them by their colonisers. To bear witness to the events of a nation's history would, then, be to witness people lose themselves, to turn away from lost ways of being, which, for Saha, are still alive in his native village and extended family. His is a twofold sense of history, an excess we renounce for our own integrity and an everyday spiritual discipline.

The second part of the book is titled "My Roots No Rain," a reference to the privation of Sandilipay, in north Ceylon, to Rajan's lack of connection to it or to his exile in Britain after the pogroms. Rajan comes of age around Sri Lankan independence. At university, he becomes involved with the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party as it organises the Ceylonese Hartal of 1952. The Hartal grimly proves that the state is perfectly willing to shoot its own people. Rajan casts off all familial duty to marry Lali, a working-class Sinhalese woman pregnant with the child of a dockworker who was shot in the Hartal. They settle in Anuradhapura, the ancient Buddhist capital, where the rise of Sinhala nationalism, the wave upon which Solomon Bandaranaike rode to power in 1956, makes itself known in gossip, rumour and their neighbours' disapproval. Rajan, "a true Ceylonese," struggles to think of himself as Tamil, as though to be so distinct from the Sinhalese is to lose a part of himself. In the section's harrowing closing scene, he kneels before Sinhala thugs, chanting a Buddhist hymn to prove he is Sinhala. It is an attempt at disguise but also a sincere plea.

As the socialist parties back Bandaranaike, Lal—Rajan's best friend and Lali's brother—leaves the LSSP in disgust. He blames the lack of a genuine worker- and peasant-led socialism for the unrest. Para, Saha's illegitimate half-brother, the kind of shrewd, undaunted man Lali considers the backbone of the country, tells her that communal violence is built into the constitution. One person, one vote made the Sinhalese a readymade majority. "It is the legacy the British left us," he says, "divide and rule." Thus, colonialism has divorced them not only from their history but from each other. Each of their reactions to the racism and violence poised to overtake their lives invokes perversity or derangement. Lal is shocked that Buddhism and socialism can be turned against their own nature.

In the Sri Lankan anthropologist E Valentine Daniel's *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence*, we find an elaborate gloss on this popular formula. He argues that British colonialism introduced a new regime of knowledge, in which history and the nation state, whose story it constituted, legitimated people in a way it previously had not. In the "discovery" of Ceylon's past and the scripting of its modernity, the extant Sinhala Buddhist tradition of chronicles—the Mahavamsa being the most important—fits into the new scheme of things more easily than their fantastic Tamil Saiva equivalents, related to a non-linear temporality. So, the history of Ceylon became Sinhala history, the nation a Sinhala nation. This is also what differentiates the two modern-day ethnic nationalisms. Sinhala nationalism has sought to restore or continue a past, while Tamil nationalism has tended toward the future. Sivanandan's novel alludes to this—Para makes Lali marvel that Tamils and Sinhalese, one people by nature, can be split in two.

To maintain a distinction between what we see of a society or an ideology as derangement, opposed to their true nature, which is what they used to or ought to be, gives a dual meaning to history: what happens and what should happen. To think of history as having immutable laws, when it often appears not to, is to inhabit this contradiction.

Karl Marx, writing about Louis Napoléon's counter-revolution in France, said that the "social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past, but only from the future." The first two parts of Sivanandan's novel chronicle how the Left in Ceylon betrayed this dictum. Buddhist nationalism relies on the poetry of the past for its appeal. The protagonists of these first two parts were sympathetic outsiders to the Left. The third part, "False Memories," has a committed socialist as its hero: Vijay, a Sinhalese boy, close to his Tamil grandparents and their village. What begins as the desire for revenge against the nationalist thugs who killed his mother, Lali, in 1958, and his first love, Padma, in the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna insurrection of 1971, matures into militancy, driving him eventually to work with the Tamil armed resistance, in whom he finds a poetry of the future that is absent among the Sinhalese.

Vijay's life in the wake of the Sinhala Only Act of 1956 is like one of those movies in which the hero wakes up to find that only he remembers some critical incident. The amnesia of his world drives him mad. His students do not believe anything he teaches them; his wife does not believe he was in prison without even a trial during the Wellikada Massacre of 1983: "The doctors said you would have delusions." The closer he gets to the heart of events in Sri Lanka, the more helpless and alienated he feels from everyone around him. It is a deep alienation that makes him abandon his "own people," including his wife, altogether, as if their amnesia, the version of history they believe, has placed them beyond communication.

WE ARE NOW SO ACCUSTOMED to certain approaches to the problem of communal violence that we have accepted them. The most common assumption is that if the further refinement and recognition of the truth fails to keep history from derailing, we must work harder to spread what we know, to convince others. This assumption is present in the Marxist notion of "false consciousness." It is behind the copious writing in India that seeks to rehabilitate or reclaim Hinduism. It is even present in anti-caste thought, in the emphasis given to scientificity and rationalism. Sivanandan is no exception. The socialists who accept the state of the nation in his novel are united with the amnesiacs in their attitude of disbelief toward violence. This is especially true of the novel's heroes. They are shocked and dismayed at the Left's fecklessness, Buddhism's ruthlessness, the brutality of ordinary people. This does not mean that they are naïve or ineffectual—only that their stability, like ours, depends on a clear barrier between sense and senselessness. When violence threatens this barrier, Sivanandan and his heroes seek to maintain it through rationalisation.

This tendency of rational language to distance violence is most apparent in Sivanandan's portrayal of the Tamil armed struggle—called "The Boys" in the novel. Vijay, having moved to his uncle Para's house, connects with the struggle through his cousin Yogi, a commander. What first appears to be the revolution Vijay and his comrades dreamed of degenerates into undisciplined squads of emotion.

Val Daniel's book, for which he spent a decade doing fieldwork, picks up both chronologically and conceptually where Sivanandan stops.

> And then, they had begun to fight each other over who could serve the people, which faction, which dogma, till the people mattered no more... and the army came back...and the war had to be fought all over again...only this time there were no people in it, only armies and warlords and fiefs and kingdoms...and the redistribution centres became places of ransom, medicines ceased to arrive and the nurseries grew into nurseries of war.

The ellipses here are Sivanandan's and give a sense of being unable to account for the sudden chaos. His language is at its most imprecise here, with archaic epithets such as "warlord" and "fief" suggesting a regression to a more primal, irrational mode of political conflict, an anti-modern political project.

Sivanandan is more pointed and clear elsewhere. About the cyanide capsule fighters had to wear around their necks, he writes:

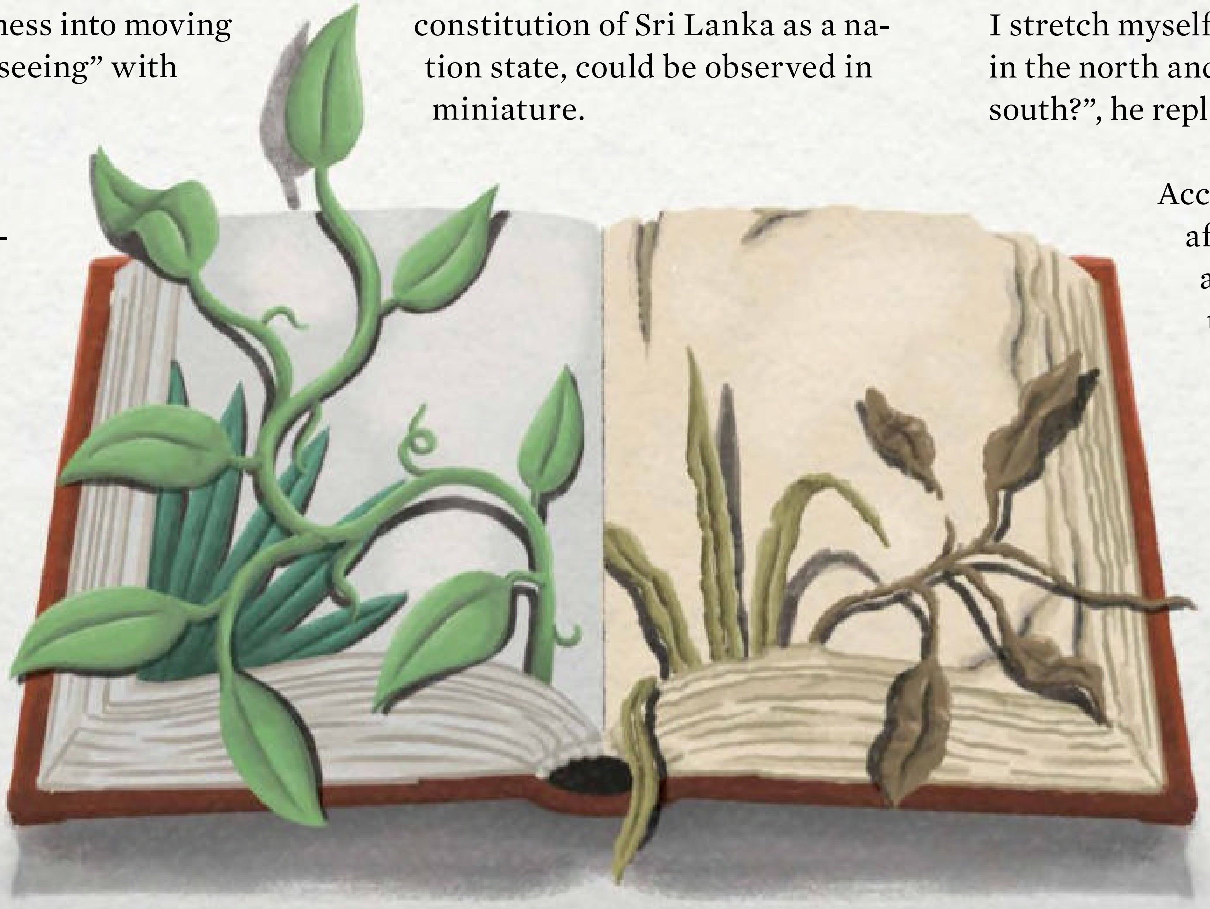
> Vijay had never understood the suicide pill. It was such a symbol of waste, of no-hope, of death as a way of life. It had such a finality about it. Maybe it was alright at the beginning when it symbolized a heroic refusal to inform, at least implied choice; but now that it had been raised to dogma, belief, ideology, it symbolized the end of choice. And the end of choice was the beginning of terror.

It is at the beginning of terror that Sivanandan falters, writing violence as if it were madness, as if it were outside the everyday and the historical.

Val Daniel's book, for which he spent a decade doing fieldwork, picks up both chronologically and conceptually where Sivanandan stops. In asking how to write about violence, it pushes us toward a more ambiguous, sidelong contiguity with history and the modern state whose story it tells. He shows violence that seems an invasion from another time to be distinctly modern. He gives the name "history" not only to our salvation but to our ruin, the name "violence" not only to our ruin but to our salvation.

For Daniel, like for Sivanandan's Saha, violence emerges in the void left by colonial invasion but, unlike Saha, he does not conceive of even a modest return. The present historical mode of being supersedes and is distinguished from the mythic. It offers us a new, critical way of seeing the world while it takes away a mode in which seeing the world and being in it remained fused, wherein things look less like various constellations of axioms we wear or remove, like glasses, and more like they—and we—were simply meant to be that way:

> traditional historic consciousness has, since colonization, been goaded by a characteristically European historical consciousness into moving toward a "way of seeing" with the concurrent denial of a "way of being" in the world. The historic consciousness that found its place of germination in Buddhist monasteries and among monkish chroniclers had not denied that theirs was a mode of being. The new, largely European-induced, modern historic consciousness, however, lays claim to transcending being.



The colonial encounter initiated a transition wherein history went from a way of being to a way of seeing. This transition from mythic to historical, however, like our transition to capitalism, was only partial, and the loss of prior ways of being has left a vacuum, a tear in the popular consciousness. This is where nationalism intervenes.

Nationalism marshalls mythic forces and objects, and lends a double-edged meaning to historical consciousness. In the early years of the war, Daniel went on a guided tour of some pilgrimage sites in Anuradhapura, including the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi, said to be a graft from the tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment. The town of Anuradhapura, which is like any town, is not built around the ruins of the ancient Buddhist kingdom like, say, the town of Tirupati is built around the temple. The town simply grew as the ruins fell into neglect. The ruins were given over to the burgeoning tourism business, transforming the Sri Maha Bodhi into not simply an object of devotion but a historical object that viewers came to absorb through knowledge rather than feeling. During the war, guided tours became sites where the concatenation of history and myth, which was the very constitution of Sri Lanka as a nation state, could be observed in miniature.

Pointing to the stupas around the Sri Maha Bodhi, Daniel's tour guide, who speaks English and Sinhala, gives the group his version of the story of the Buddhist king Dutugemunu, who had the stupas built.

> Elara was a Tamil king who invaded this country 350 years after the Buddha attained nirvana. It was a time when Sinhala people had forgotten the Dhamma and began fighting among themselves. Elara ruled the country for forty four years. The Sinhala king was Kavantissa. He was nowhere to be found in this area. He fled south to Ruhuna. He had two sons, Tissa and Gamani. Tissa, like his father, was a coward. When Gamani was only sixteen—and you tell your sons not to join the army—when he was only sixteen before he even had whiskers, he attempted to go to war against Elara. Three times he tried and three times his father stood in his way. He preferred to talk, sitting at the round table. Gamani was disgusted. So what did he do? He sent his father and brother a sari to wear! We must send a few saris to our leaders in Colombo [laughs]. One day the prince was very sad … He was curled up like a baby on his mother's stomach on the sofa. "Son, why don't stretch yourself and sleep in bed" his mother wanted to know. "How can I stretch myself if there are Tamils in the north and the ocean is in the south?", he replied.

According to the guide, after the prince kills a million and thirty thousand Tamils, and unites the island under Buddhism, he is wracked by guilt. But the arhats, the Buddhist enlightened, reassure him that he did no wrong. They were unbelievers, "no more esteemed than beasts."

Although the guide is really giving his version of an episode in the Mahavamsa, he feels the need to attribute the story to the liberal Sinhala historian KM De Silva's *History of Sri Lanka*. Here, myth and history, past and present are collapsed, becoming identical instead of simply related. The distant relation to the object that comes with knowledge is replaced by identification and a call to act. Dutugemunu's story is very important to popular Sinhala nationalism. It makes an appearance in Sivanandan's novel as well, when Vijay's students hector him with the propaganda they have been reading. Vijay badly wants to tell them that the victorious Dutugemunu built many monuments to Elara and honoured him as a great king and opponent, but stays silent.

What Vijay sees in the story of Dutugemunu and Elara resonates with Daniel's ideal of violence. Violence is not, he claims, mad or inhuman. It has a ritual purpose in human life: to teach us where our self ends and another begins, to draw us, however painfully, into mutual recognition. But the violence to which the guide exhorts his tourists is of a different nature. In the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and Franz Fanon, we find the notion that violence can be self-actualisation, that it can express an uncontainable or unerasable vitality and self-love. Where this type of violence is concerned, pleasure consists not only in hitting but in getting hit, not only in extension but in limits. In the case of the tour guide and his audience, the selfhood engaged is too callow. An identification in which there is boundary between self and object, in which, effectively, all objects are self, is, in Daniel's words, "narcissistic infantilism," an absence rather than an overflowing of self.

> Indeed one way of understanding the current violence on the island is to see it as a check on the narcissistic expansiveness of infantile impulses, impulses that fail to recognize that the whole world is not one's own and that all of being is not encompassed within the boundaries of an ever-expanding identity … The transcendence of narcissistic particularity, along with its corollary, the emergence of a universal/communal being, is the mark of becoming truly human. The threat of violence is the catalyst for this rite of passage.

But this rite of passage does not, he argues, take place in the case of violence in Sri Lanka. Today, as it becomes more and more part of common sense to see Sri Lanka as a colonial power to its Tamil minority, Daniel's assertions that both sides in the war displayed the same narcissism and that the Tamil armed struggle lost its moral upper hand in 1998 with the bombing of the Temple of the Tooth—said to house one of Buddha's teeth—are bound to seem unjust. There is, after all, a difference between the violence of the oppressor and that of the oppressed.

But Sri Lanka is neither one nor two nations. It is pluri-national, with the Muslim and "Indian" Tamil communities living as separate, independent minority communities, often subject to both Tamil and Sinhala violence. Daniel is a Dalit of mixed heritage who grew up in the hill country. His account of the civil war is unique in that it gives primacy to the people variously called estate Tamils, Indian Tamils or hill country Tamils. They are predominantly Dalits from Tamil Nadu, brought to Sri Lanka by the British to work the plantations after the slave trade was abolished. They are the poorest and most backward group in Sri Lanka. One of the country's first acts after independence stripped them of citizenship and voting rights. (Though the decision has since been reversed, many maintain Indian passports today.) The Left saw them as a "pillar of Indian imperialism," responsible for stealing Sinhala jobs. Many who fled to India found it so tough that they went back to Sri Lanka. Those who stayed on lived mostly in refugee camps or as indentured labour in hill stations such as Kodaikanal. The Tamil Tigers' vision of Eelam did not include them. From their perspective, the war looks less like the colonised fighting back against their colonisers than like two vying nationalisms and their armies, for whom everyone else is collateral damage.

The estate Tamils' example does not show that Tamil nationalism is just as bad as Sinhala nationalism—it is not—but serves to disrupt the dialectic structure of what Daniel calls the nation's master narrative, in which conflict and, theoretically, synthesis would come from conflicting Tamil and Sinhala nationalisms, two visions of a state. In Sivanandan's novel, estate Tamils feature heavily but never as integral to the unfolding of historical events. Daniel shows us that, ironically, the people who built the island's economy are as inarticulable as its history. The estate Tamils have no projected future nation and have lost the place of their ancestry for good. They live more than others in the present, in the separate totality of each working day. But the excess and chaos of violence tear open the symmetries of history and narrative, creating an overwhelming present such that, Daniel argues, "the life of the nation began to resemble more those of the estate Tamils." Of an interview with an estate Tamil woman named Kamalam, who has forgotten her missing son's face, he records:

> Occasionally a wave from the distant past rolls toward her. But most of the time she lives thinking "What happened, what will happen, who knows." Then she poignantly adds, "I don't say, 'Tomorrow my son might come', I say, 'Here he comes. Here I see his face.' That is the way I see. That is how life is." … The vision of and for the future of the nation has undergone a fate similar to this mother's vision of her son's face. Prior to 1983, and even immediately after that summer, both separatists and non separatists were able to define the contours of their future nation as they saw it clearly. It is not so today. The moment a glimmer of a clear outline begins to take form, the present, with a bomb, a betrayal, an ambush, or an assassination, shatters the outline and scatters the bits of the nascent image.

Daniel is suggesting here that the irreducible particularity and excess of violence make it the counterpoint to the coherence, the abstracting and generalising tendencies of history. This argument is most forceful and convincing in his writing on torture. Interviewing Tamil victims of torture, both by the Sri Lankan army and by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Daniel noted that it was very difficult for them to convey, and for him to understand, their experience. If the skin bore marks or scars—from rods, pipes, ropes or cigarettes—they were so subtle that only the victim could trace them back to the scene of torture. To Daniel, they barely seemed like marks at all. The torturers often took care to leave no marks, in which case not even the skin attested to the victim's experience. Such victims would often not be believed. One victim was tortured for insubordination in an LTTE training camp. They ham-

In asking how to write about violence, Daniel's book pushes us toward a more ambiguous, sidelong contiguity with history and the modern state whose story it tells.

mered a rusty nail all the way into his right foot and left it there for a day, then broke his legs till he was paralysed from the waist down. He was left dragging himself around as an "example" to new recruits. Though he had lost sensation in his lower body, he still complained of a sharp, searing pain where the nail had been. His campmates did not believe him. They poked and prodded at the spot and he, as they suspected, felt no sensation. Still, he complained of constant pain.

Words falter before pain because of its particularity. Daniel's subjects are so individuated by pain that they cannot attest that anyone but themselves was tortured nor convey the details and routine of their imprisonment. Or it is not that they cannot but that they do not see the point; they cannot make Daniel, or anyone, understand what is most crucial to their experience. Historical action and being hinge on our imaginations grasping a unity in the proliferation of experience. But there is a gap between the language of history and the silence of pain. Poetry, though, because it can disclose experience as language without severing it from hermetic silence, because it is language that carries the incommunicable, sutures the tear between pain and history. This is one reason the flowering of a new literature during the armed struggle—a development Sivanandan ignores and Daniel notes only briefly—produced mostly poetry.

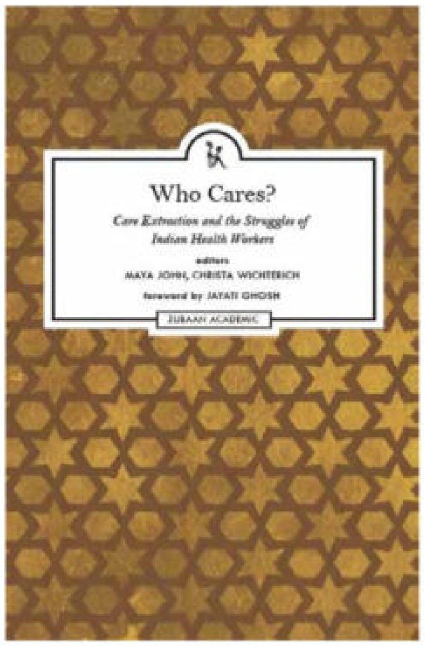
The effusive, elegiac poetry of the generation that began publishing in the 1980s relied heavily on sound, theatre, musicality and the invisible presence of an abandoned prosody. Writing amid struggle against an all-engulfing threat, the late S Vilvaratnam turned the particularity of his experience into the drama of essence, of negation and actualisation:

> over all this
> the hunter spreads his net: the great
> engulfing darkness.
>
> We cannot throw off the net.
> Our hands claw, clutch only at darkness.
> Which hand is mine?
> I cannot tell.
> Even the day dressed in white
> has the darkness of a house in mourning.
>
> In this capture, this perfection, how
> will I be granted
> the gypsy, the propheteer's voice
> foretelling the coming of His light?
> Will a borrowed voice bring out my Self?
> Will light speak amid the babbling dark?
>
> No; no.
> I write my refusal.
> My Self fans out
> from this countervoice.

Here, we have the same circumstance that, according to Daniel, sparks violence: it is not clear where self ends and other begins. Vilvaratnam calls this state a "perfection," summoning other words, such as "unity" and "harmony," that describe the absolute in which history culminates. It is the sense of unity and totality that he refuses when he refuses the prophetic voice, the metaphor of dawn and inexorable light, and it is from this refusal that Self emerges.

ANYONE FOLLOWING the Aragalaya movement on social media at its height will have noticed that it was often falsely called the longest peaceful protest in the island's history. It was not. That distinction belongs to the Tamil mothers of the disappeared, of whom a contingent from the south even set up a booth at Galle Face. President Ranil Wickremesinghe has told them variously to "forget about the past" and that, "If they are missing, they are probably dead." He is right. They are probably dead. Most of their bodies will probably never be found. But the protesters will not forget about the past, and their struggle demands of us that we do not either. Their protest is the anti-Aragalaya. Amid the spurious practicality of a united front for demands that accept the government's limitations, the mothers stand committed to the impossible, which is one definition of mourning.

A struggle whose spur is mourning, rather than the historical consciousness idealised in Sivanandan's novel, does not pretend that the present, with its violence and chaos, is a derangement of society's true character. Its refusal of the political present does not require that it be judged a true or false expression. Regardless of the true or ideal character of their country, regardless of the practicability of their demands, the mothers of the disappeared refuse to accept not only the crimes that the state has committed against them, but also the notion that they can, or will, inevitably be remedied. To me, this refusal seems to offer more than any agitation for reform. Perhaps the poetry of the future will be born not from a revolution's specious clarity but from the primal uncertainty of mourning. ■


Who Cares?
Care Extraction and the Struggles of Indian Health Workers
editors
MAYA JOHN, CHRISTA WICHTERICH
foreword by JAYATI GHOSH
ZUBAAN ACADEMIC

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CARE EXTRACTION AND THE STRUGGLES OF INDIAN HEALTH WORKERS

Edited by Maya John and Christa Wichterich

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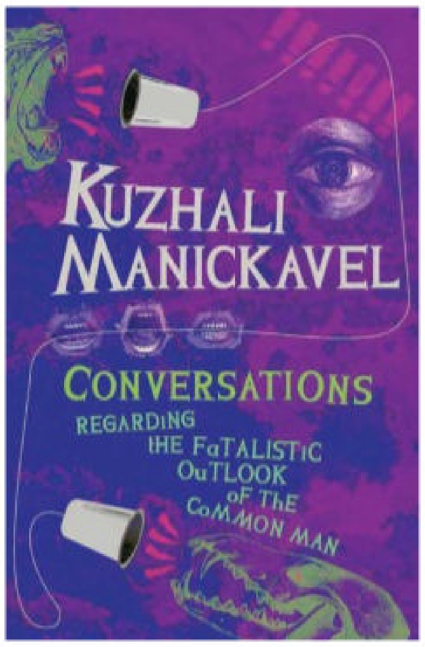
KUZHALI MANICKAVEL
CONVERSATIONS
REGARDING
THE FATALISTIC
OUTLOOK
OF THE
COMMON MAN

CONVERSATIONS REGARDING THE FATALISTIC OUTLOOK OF THE COMMON MAN

Kuzhali Manickavel

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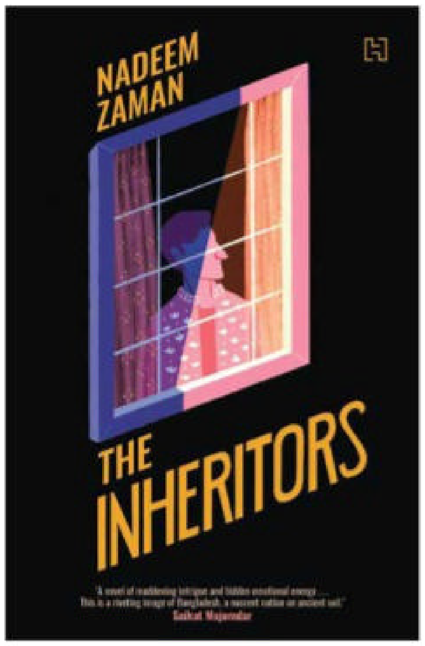
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THE INHERITORS

THE INHERITORS

Nadeem Zaman

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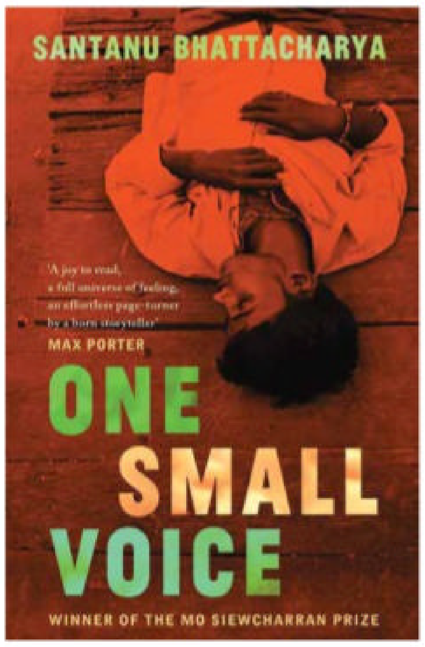
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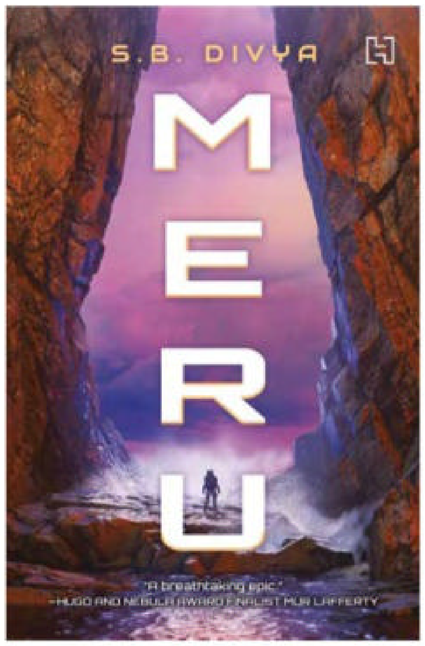

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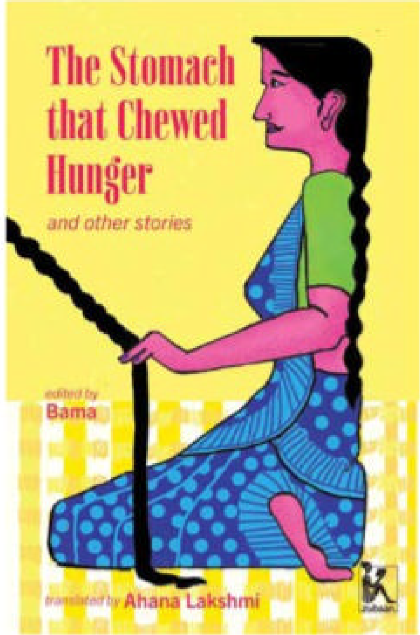

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AND OTHER STORIES

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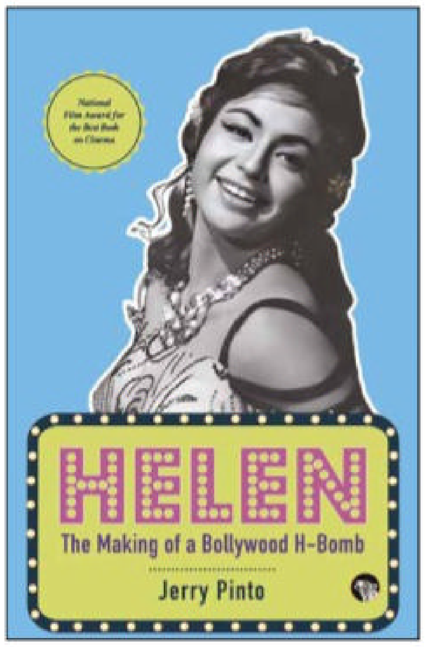

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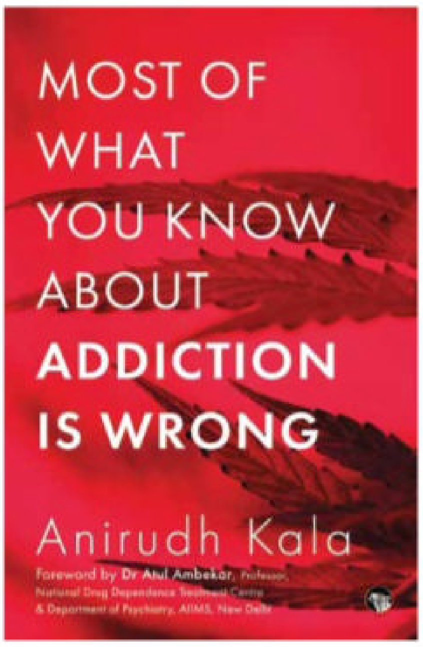

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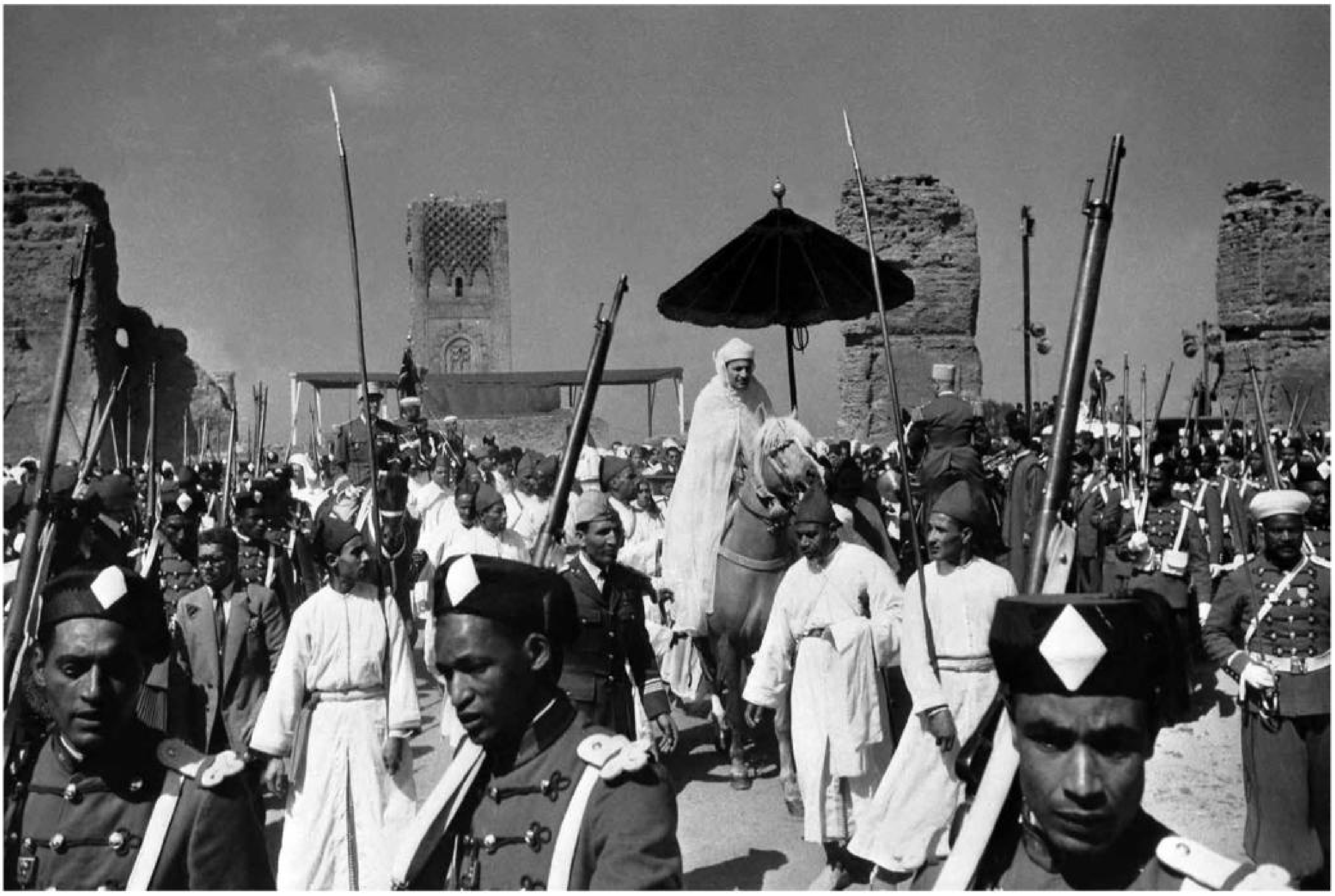

INTERCONTINENTALE / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

ON 2 MARCH 1956, Muhammad V, the sultan of Morocco—seen here riding to Friday prayers a week later—proclaimed his country's independence from France. In doing so, he repudiated the Treaty of Fès, which his uncle Abd al-Hafid had signed, in 1912, after French troops helped him suppress a rebellion. The treaty established a French protectorate over most of Morocco, with Spain controlling the Mediterranean coast. Muhammad's father, Yusuf, was installed as sultan, but real power was vested in a resident general answerable only to Paris.

Following Yusuf's death, in 1927, the French authorities selected Muhammad, his third son, as the new sultan. Three years later, they drafted a decree that established two separate legal regimes. While most of Morocco would retain shariat, regions that were primarily inhabited by the Amazigh—an ethnic group scattered across North Africa—would have their own laws. The decree enraged Moroccan nationalists, most of whom were urban Arabs. They rallied around Muhammad, who convinced the French to withdraw the decree, which he had initially signed. The sultan began offering tacit support to nationalist sentiments.

Muhammad supported the Allies during the Second World War and, in 1943, the US president, Franklin D Roosevelt, urged him to seek independence. After a number of leading Moroccan nationalists were arrested on charges of collaborating with the Nazis, riots broke out throughout the protectorate. Muhammad began refusing to sign the resident general's decrees. In 1951, under the pretext of protecting him from an Amazigh rebellion they had encouraged, the French took Muhammad prisoner and forced him to denounce the nationalists. Two years later, they deported him to Corsica and, later, to Madagascar. The nationalist movement began guerrilla warfare, often finding shelter in the Spanish Zone. The French, who were also facing a rebellion in Algeria, allowed Muhammad to return in October 1955 and eventually agreed to complete independence.

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